

**DISCERNING A SPIRITUALITY FOR  
TRANSFORMATIVE MISSION: IN DIALOGUE WITH  
THE COMBONI MISSIONARY SISTERS**

by

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## Summary

This research seeks to acquire a deep understanding of how spirituality and mission correlate and shape each other. An initial review of missiological texts has revealed that spirituality is not often (nor explicitly) taken into consideration by missiologists. Likewise, mission generally does not occupy a central place within the academic discipline of spirituality. I contend that spirituality is the *motor* of mission and missiology and therefore cannot be only briefly mentioned or omitted from missiological discourse.

This thesis explores this *relationship* with a specific focus on the Comboni Missionary Sisters. It explores the mission spirituality of their founder, Daniel Comboni, how this is taken up by the Comboni Missionary Sisters and how it shapes their lives and their being in mission. The research also aims to foster some transformations. It explores new ways for the Sisters to express their ways of being in mission in the context(s) in which they live, in order to be faithful to Comboni's charism as well as to be a relevant presence today.

The thesis proposes that mission spirituality be studied and lived by making use of a *Mission spirituality spiral*. Its six dimensions are: *spirituality*, at the centre and all along the spiral; *encounter* with other(s) and with the context; *context analysis*; *theological reflection* (encounter with Scripture and Tradition); *discernment* for transformative ways of being in mission and *reflexivity*.

A qualitative analysis is presented from interviews conducted with fifteen Comboni Missionary Sisters working in various continents. Genuine encounter with the Triune God, with the other(s), with the context and its analysis, and encounter with Scripture and Tradition lead to transformation in the person and subsequently to finding new ways of being in mission.

The mission spirituality spiral is used as an analytical tool to study the mission spirituality of Comboni and the Comboni Missionary Sisters and also as a mobilising tool. Suggestions for further areas of research are made. The thesis concludes with some personal learning and transformation.

**Key words:** mission, spirituality, encounter, context analysis, discernment, reflexivity, mission spirituality, *ministeriality*, Daniel Comboni, Comboni Missionary Sisters.



## **Dedication**

I wish to dedicate this thesis to the all Comboni Missionary Sisters, who in different ways and contexts commit themselves to keep the charism of Daniel Comboni alive, and in his footsteps, live his mission spirituality in a feminine way.

I also dedicate this thesis to all those who wish to embark on mission and missiology with the desire to discern a spirituality that leads to transformative ways of being in mission.



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## **Declaration of Originality**

I declare that *Discerning a Spirituality for Transformative Mission: in Dialogue with the Comboni Missionary Sisters* is my own work and that all sources that I have used and quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at UNISA for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.

Signed

Date



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## Abbreviations

AD	<i>Aparecida Document</i> . 2007. (Episcopal Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean).
CA 1970	Acts of the Chapter 1970.
CA 1977	Acts of the Chapter 1977.
CA 1980	Acts of the Chapter 1980.
CA 1986	Acts of the Chapter 1986.
CA 1992	Acts of the Chapter 1992.
CA 1998	Acts of the Chapter 1998.
CA 2004	Acts of the Chapter 2004.
CA 2010	Acts of the Chapter 2010.
CA 2016	Acts of the Chapter 2016.
Cairo 97	Assembly on Multicultural Communities. 1997.
AG	<i>Ad Gentes divinitus</i> . 7 Dec.1965. (Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity).
APMR	Archivio Pie Madri – Roma
DM	<i>The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission</i> . 1984. (Secretariat for Non-Christians).
DP	<i>Dialogue and Proclamation. Reflection And Orientations On Interreligious Dialogue And The Proclamation Of The Gospel Of Jesus Christ</i> . 19 May 1991. (Pontifical Council For Inter-Religious Dialogue).
DV	<i>Dei Verbum</i> . 18 November 1965. (Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity).
EG	<i>Evangelii Gaudium</i> . 2013. (Apostolic Exhortation of the Pope Francis to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World).
GDC	<i>General Directory for Catechesis</i> . 1997. (Sacred Congregation for the Clergy).

GE	<i>Gaudete et Exsultate</i> . 2018. (Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis on the Call to Holiness in Today's World).
GS	<i>Gaudium et spes</i> . 7 December 1965. (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World).
IM	<i>De Iustitia in mundo</i> . 1971. (Justice in the World) (The Synod of the Bishops).
LS	<i>Laudato Si'</i> . 2015. (Encyclical Letter of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home).
NA	<i>Nostra Aetate</i> . 18 October 1965. (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions).
PC	<i>Perfectae Caritatis</i> . 28 October 1965. (Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life).
RM	<i>Redemptoris Missio</i> . <i>On the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate</i> . 1990. (Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II).
SC	<i>Sacrosanctum Concilium</i> . 4 December 1963. (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy).
TEE	<i>To the Ends of the Earth: A Pastoral Statement on World Mission</i> . 1987. United States Catholic Conference.
TTL	<i>Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes</i> . 2012. (New Affirmation on Mission and Evangelism) (CWME/WCC).

All quotations from the Bible are taken from *The New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition: Anglicized Text*.

# Chapter One

## Mission and spirituality in relationship: Introducing the question

### 1.1 Introduction and identification of fundamental questions

I am a member of the Comboni Missionary Sisters, a religious congregation in the Catholic Church. The international headquarters of the congregation, comprising the Religious Superiors, is located in Rome. The congregation was founded in 1872 by Daniel Comboni. More is said about the Comboni Missionary Sisters and their Founder respectively in Chapters Four and Three.

The request by the Comboni Missionary Sisters in Rome that I undertake a study in Missiology caught me by surprise. My pastoral experience here in South Africa, in the township of Mamelodi, was leading me to deepen both my sense of spirituality and my spiritual contribution to pastoral work. I started to read David Bosch's book *Transforming Mission* (1991) which aroused my interest in and enthusiasm for Missiology.

The decisive turning point was an article that I read about Mission Spirituality (Karecki 2012), followed by my discussion on it with its author. It resulted in my being able to position myself in the field of study and to determine the direction of research. My being drawn both to spirituality and to missiology had suddenly come together like pieces of a puzzle.

I believe that the two disciplines – spirituality and missiology – have to be brought into conversation for mutual enrichment. The realisation dawned that the focus of the research was not simply mission and spirituality in general; it had to be set in the context of the discernment of a relevant mission spirituality for the religious Congregation of the Comboni Missionary Sisters, of which I am a member.

The sub-field of mission that I explore in this research is therefore, Mission Spirituality. An initial review of missiological texts has revealed that spirituality is not

often (nor explicitly) taken into consideration by missiologists. Likewise, mission generally does not occupy a central place within the academic discipline of spirituality.

I contend that spirituality is the *motor* of mission and missiology and therefore cannot be only briefly mentioned or omitted from missiological discourse. It has to be deepened and brought into the missiological discussion. Spirituality has at its core the encounter with the Triune God through the sacraments, prayer and contemplation, Holy Scripture and Tradition,<sup>1</sup> and also in everyday life, especially amidst the poor and the vulnerable at the margins of every society. That encounter is credibly explored by drawing upon the *mission spirituality spiral* that will be explained in Chapter Two. I will use the mission spirituality spiral as an analytical tool, in order to study the mission spirituality of Comboni (3.5) and of the Comboni Missionary Sisters (4.5). In Chapter 6 (6.3) I will use it as a mobilising tool.

Although, the notion of encounter (or experience of God) may be questioned as not “critical” (Sheldrake 1994:16) or “distinctive” enough, it is according to my research and my personal conviction at the core of spirituality.

Accepting that spirituality has to be subjected to continuous research, and has to be brought into dialogue with Scripture and Tradition, it must necessarily be explored. It is the relationship with God that makes mission a participation in the work of God. Therefore, spirituality is what underpins mission; it is the *motor* of mission.

With the above considerations in mind, my research question is: how can the Comboni Missionary Sisters be a relevant presence in the contexts in which they live while still remaining faithful to the mission spirituality of their founder, St Daniel Comboni?

The purpose of this study is to offer transformative ways of being in mission that can guide the *ministeriality*<sup>2</sup> of the Comboni Missionary Sisters.

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<sup>1</sup> “Christian faith is inescapably bound up with the lives and the words of actual persons, for the truth of what was handed on rested finally on the faithfulness of the *traditores*, those who did the handing on” (Wilken 2003:46). The Second Vatican Council document, *Dei Verbum*, names that apostolic preaching has been passed down in two ways over the centuries. Alongside the canonically recognised written tradition, there also exists an oral tradition. The Vatican Council teaches that this oral tradition “takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known” (DV 9). For Catholics, this living oral transmission is called Tradition.

<sup>2</sup> The term *ministeriality* is explained in the section on special terminology (1.10.7).

## 1.2 Theoretical framework

For my research, I utilise an interpretative paradigm together with some elements of the critical approach. The interpretative paradigm is the empathetic understanding (*Verstehen*) of everyday life in a specific context. Human beings continuously attempt to make sense of their lives and their world; they try to define, give meaning to, create, justify and interpret their situations and actions. The interpretative approach guides the way the researcher enters into contact with the lives of a particular group of people – in my research they are the Comboni Missionary Sisters – and tries to interpret their experience and reality. This approach is related to hermeneutics, which is the theory of textual interpretation (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport 2011:8; Swinton & Mowat 2006:34-36).

The interpretative framework presupposes the collection of data or information and its interpretation. The methodology used involves interviewing selected members of the Comboni Missionary Sisters.

I seek to employ this interpretative framework because it does not investigate issues of objectivity and explanation, but rather focuses on meaning and deeper empathetic understanding.

The intention of the research is to acquire a deeper understanding of how spirituality and mission correlate and shape each other. This interpretative framework facilitates the process of correlation. Hence, the research explores this relationship between mission and spirituality, with a specific focus on the Comboni Missionary Sisters. I explore and therefore to attempt to deeply understand how the mission spirituality of St. Daniel Comboni is taken up by the Comboni Missionary Sisters and how it shapes their lives and *ministeriality*.

## 1.3 Teleology

The research does not aim at only achieving a deeper understanding; it aims to foster some areas of transformation. A deeper understanding of how the mission spirituality of their founder shapes the lives of the Comboni Missionary Sisters can help the Sisters to explore new ways to express their *ministeriality* in the context(s) in which they live. In other words, this research seeks to find new transformative ways of being

in mission. The interpretative tool used is the *mission spirituality spiral* that is explained in Chapter Two.

## 1.4 Ontology

Ontology concerns the way the nature of reality is perceived (or constructed). The ontology adopted in the proposed research is a theistic and realist one. It encompasses the belief in an eternal God who has entered into an ongoing relationship with the world through the act of creation and who has since been active in the history of humanity. God started God's mission with creation. Mission is fundamentally a work of the Trinity (Ahonen 2000:43) and primarily consists in God's desire for an ongoing encounter and relationship with humanity. In chapter Two (2.3) these thoughts will be developed in relation to mission.

God revealed Godself to the people of Israel and this revelation finds its fulfilment through the sending of the Son, and through the sending of the Holy Spirit. The Church, called to participate in God's mission, is privileged to share God's love for the world and for humanity (AG 10). I am here referring not only to the love God shows humanity in sending God's Son into the world, but also to the love *with* and *from* which God creates the world. That is what some theologians call *creatio ex amore*. They speak of this in various ways (Schmid 1989:179-192). Sölle wonders why Western theology developed a *creatio ex nihilo* but never developed a *creatio ex amore* theology. "If God did not create the world out of love, then any notion of creation remains senseless and empty" (Sölle 2007:31, my translation). Mitchell (2015:70-74) refers to Piero Coda's concept of creation *ex nihilo amoris*. Delio (2007:254-273) explores the relationship between theology and metaphysics in the light of Bonaventure's theology and sees the emergence of a *creatio ex amore* through the centrality of the Divine Word. Youngs (2014:165-186) shows that a strong understanding of *creatio ex nihilo*, explored through the lens of *kenosis*, leads to a concept of creation *out of freedom* and consequently to a creation *for the sake of love*.

In her book on Trinity theology, LaCugna (1991:353) stresses that "[t]he God who is love (*Ipse Amore*) does not remain locked up in the 'splendid isolation' of self-love but spills over into what is other than God, giving birth to creation and history." God pours out God-self into our hearts as love. In this way we also become God's self-donating love for others (LaCugna 1991:354). From divine love and freedom, creation



comes into being. God did not create because God needed the world. The reason for creation, for LaCugna (:355),

lies entirely in the unfathomable mystery of God, who is self-originating and self-communicating love. While the world is the gracious result of divine freedom, God's freedom means necessarily being who and what is. From this standpoint the world is not created *ex nihilo* but *ex amore, ex condilectione*, that is out of divine love.

As God creates *ex amore*, God is always with God's creatures. God's desire is "to become fully one with each of us, to eradicate sin and death, and to live with us for all eternity" (:382). On the basis that God creates the world *ex amore*, I accordingly accept that the primary mission of God is to encounter, and establish a unitive relationship with God's creatures.

It is also important to emphasise that both this view of creation and the incarnation are God's acts of love. The coming of the Son into the world is God's act of love to creation and to humanity. It is this same love poured out in creation and incarnation that initiates the encounter with humanity.

It is also to be highlighted that creation did not happen once for all. Rather it is a *creatio continua ex amore*. "Creation actively takes place in the present moment as divine love expresses itself in infinite being open to more being and love" (Delio 2013:74).

As God is *continuously* creating the world, and therefore, *continuously* at work in the world, God's work can be traced and recognised by "scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (GS 4). The interpretation of these signs has its place in the present research.

## 1.5 Epistemology

Epistemology concerns the nature of knowledge. The reality "out there," the social world, is not a "series of ever-changing social constructions" (Swinton & Mowat 2006:76). Truth is accessible as the Christian tradition "assumes the reality of revelation and the reality of creation" (:76).

I intend to avoid the radical objectivity of *naïve realism* or *positivism*, which claims that some things can be fully known through correct scientific methods and by restraining personal involvement – judgement and emotions – (De Vos et al 2011:309;

Sarantakos 1998:3-4, 36-37; Wright 1992:32). If some things can be known definitively, they can be tested empirically; that makes them objectively true. Consequently, according to that approach, things that cannot be tested or known definitively bear in themselves a certain nonsense. As theology cannot be subjected to such a scientific, definitive process, theology is, in the eyes of positivism, relativised (Wright 1992:32-33).

I also intend to avoid the radical subjectivity of *constructivism*, which limits reality to merely a social construct, which can be known only in the mind of the subject (Wright 1992:34; De Vos et al 2011:310-312). For constructivists, it is through personal experience that knowledge is constructed, namely through an “unending series of processes of inner construction” (Schwandt 2007:38). This means that the subject is actively and fully involved in the process of knowledge.

The epistemological framework of *critical realism* that Wright (1992:35-46) proposes as alternative to the two above kinds of epistemology is therefore preferred and adopted. That framework recognises that reality can be known through a process in which the knower and the thing known are different. In this process, things can be known better through both our constructions and the continuous dialogue between the knower and the thing known. At the same time, it has to be conceded that our constructions are not definitive and must always be open to critique and challenge. In fact, the adjective “critical” in the phrase *critical realism* indicates that it is subject to critique.

I agree with Wright in considering that, in the act of knowing, the knower bears a subjective starting point which is made of his/her personality, of his/her *world*, his/her story. The knower is not totally objective. His/her knowing is influenced by a series of circumstances. However this does not mean falling back into constructivism; it rather acknowledges that the knower is not and cannot be totally objective. The knower has to be “open to the possibility of the ‘known’ being other than had been expected or even desired and must be prepared to respond accordingly, not merely to observe from a distance” (Wright 1992:45). This kind of knowing respects both the thing known as it is and, simultaneously, allows the knower to be involved in the process of knowing. Wright calls this kind of critical realism “an epistemology or hermeneutic of love” (:64) I find myself in agreement with Wright’s consideration of this *love as attention*. He defines it as “the readiness to let the other *be* the other, the willingness to grow and change in oneself in relation to the other” (:64).

I regard *critical realism* or *hermeneutic of love* to be important for the present research, not only in the exploration of mission and spirituality, but also – and especially – in conducting interviews and in the succeeding evaluation. The relational and intersubjective character of *critical realism* makes it a good tool for approaching both missiology and spirituality. Herewith, I mean that in the process of deepening my knowledge of those two disciplines, my experience of them also plays a role and simultaneously is enriched – a mutual *give-and-receive*. In this sense it is of the utmost importance to practice the above mentioned *attention*, by consenting to the “otherness” of participants in the research, and being open to the changes that the experience of the interviews – and of the research – may happen in me.

## 1.6 The Research design

The research design I intend to use for my thesis follows the dynamic of a *mission spirituality spiral*, with six dimensions: *spirituality*, at the centre and all along the spiral; *encounter* with other(s) and with the context; *context analysis*; *theological reflection* (encounter with Scripture and Tradition); *discernment* for transformative ways of being in mission; and *reflexivity*. The explanation of the spiral will follow in Chapter Two.

The research accordingly integrates dimensions of Phenomenology and Critical Social Theory. Phenomenology is a complex and multifaceted philosophy. It was initiated by Alfred Schutz who intended to explain how people experience the “life world” and “what concepts and structures of experience give form and meaning to it” (De Vos et al 2011:316). There exist various kinds of phenomenology: transcendental phenomenology,<sup>3</sup> existential phenomenology, and hermeneutic phenomenology. Generally speaking phenomenology carefully describes the “ordinary conscious experience of everyday life” and the social action of persons. The phenomena – the description of things – include perception, believing, feeling, judging, in a word the experiences of bodily action (Schwandt 2007:225). The proposed research endeavours to explore, describe, and deeply understand, both the mission spirituality of the founder of the Comboni Missionary Sisters and how the Sisters live out this spirituality and mission. The interviewing of the Sisters is therefore directed to their experiences, feelings and beliefs about their mission spirituality.

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<sup>3</sup> For an explanation of transcendental phenomenology cf. Sarantakos 1998:48-49.

Critical Social Theory developed out of Marxism and integrates theory and praxis. Critical theorists see reality as constructed by the powerful, in the sense that the powerful manipulate and condition people in order to have advantage. This theory is integrated with praxis: through critical consideration of contradictions, shortcomings, and distortions in the life beliefs and social practices of the people, it aims to liberate people from the myths, ignorance and oppression that prevent them from realising their potential for creativity. Through this process people can be inspired to change those beliefs and practices. Thus Critical Social Theory implies both self-knowledge, effective social involvement and activism (Sarantakos 1998:35-39; Schwandt 2007:53-55).

With the above in mind, the research explores new transformative ways for the Sisters to express their *ministeriality* in the contexts in which they live, in order to be faithful to Comboni's charism<sup>4</sup> and to be a relevant presence today, so that the Kingdom of God may be realised in its fullness.

The Kingdom of God is a central concept in missiology and ecclesiology. Jesus came to announce the good news of the Kingdom of God. It is near (Mk 1:14-15; Lk 9:11) and it was expressed in the messianic promises of Psalm 85:10-11 and of Isaiah 61:1-2a. Jesus announces a kingdom of peace, righteousness, integrity, forgiveness, in which the poor receive the good news, the oppressed and the prisoners are set free, and the sick are healed (Reilly 1978:150-151). This Kingdom is inaugurated with Jesus (through his life, death and resurrection) and will find its fulfilment in a yet to be determined future, at the end of time that is unknown by humanity. Jesus' healing and liberating activity towards humanity demonstrates the soteriological nature of the Kingdom. In Jesus' acts of liberation, healing, and exorcism "the very nature of the God of the kingdom" is experienced (Senior & Stuhlmueeller 1991:150). The creative tension between the *already* and the *not yet* of the Kingdom of God emanates from the ministry of Jesus. Jesus inaugurates his ministry announcing that the Kingdom of God is near (Mk 1:15; Mt 4:17). He inaugurates it by overcoming various forms of evil of his time. At the same time the fullness of Kingdom still has to come. Jesus teaches the disciples to pray for its coming (Bosch 1991:32-33). The pilgrim Church therefore lives in both

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<sup>4</sup> The explanation of the term charism will follow below in the section on special terminology (1.5.2).

the *already* inaugurated Kingdom of God and the *not yet* of its plenitude (AG 9; LG 13-16, 48-51).<sup>5</sup>

The church is oriented towards the fulfilment of the reality of the kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God and its justice are linked (Bosch 1991:70-73). In the now, the church<sup>6</sup> has to announce the good news of God's kingdom and at the same time has to denounce and be committed against any kind of oppression and injustice (Gutiérrez 1988:150-156).

Pope Francis highlights that “[t]o evangelize is to make the kingdom of God present in our world” (EG 176). It was inaugurated by Jesus and is present amongst humanity, engaging humanity at all levels for its growth. Making the Kingdom of God present in the world though evangelisation includes a social dimension that cannot be ignored. Rather, it urges participation in the efforts of transforming the world with a particular attention to the poor, the oppressed and the excluded.

## 1.7 Research methodology

The method I used for the collection of research data comprises an analysis of available literature, followed by interviews with selected Comboni Missionary Sisters. There exist various types of interviews (De Vos et al 2011:347-349, 360-362; Sarantakos 1998:246-255). I have opted for semi-structured interviews as an interview schedule with predetermined questions will be employed.

Semi-structured interviews fall between unstructured and structured interviews as they contain elements of both. Semi-structured interviews present an opportunity to acquire “a detailed picture of a participant’s belief about, or perception or account of, a particular topic” (De Vos et al 2011:351). These afford flexibility to both the researcher and the participant. The interviews are more guided rather than dictated by the interview schedule. This method allows participants to be the “expert(s)” on the topic and will serve to elicit new issues or perspectives that the researcher may not have considered. Deviation from the scheduled questions may occur to a limited extent (De Vos et al

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<sup>5</sup> Bosch (1991:509), citing Becker, underlines the importance of a “radical concern for the ‘penultimate’ rather than a preoccupation with the ‘ultimate,’ into a concern for ‘what is at hand’ rather than for ‘what will be.’”

<sup>6</sup> Bevans & Schroeder (2004:310-317) provide a summary on the movement from an identification of the Catholic Church with the Kingdom of God and its being distinguished there from, on the difference between *Kingdom* and *Reign* of God, and on the steps towards considering justice and liberation from any kind of oppression as constitutive parts of evangelisation.

2011:352). These characteristics of semi-structured interviews are important because of the kind of data required. My interview schedule enables my following a logical order, guiding the participant and yet allowing her also to express what might not be sought by the questions.

The questions are informed by the mission spirituality spiral and are as follows:

- 1) Describe the context in which you live. How long have you been there?
- 2) Tell me about the most significant encounters you have had. What impact did they have on you?
- 3) What are the challenges you experience in the context in which you live?
- 4) Has the context in which you live affected your relationship with God, the way you pray or your experience of the Eucharistic celebration and the way how you are in mission? How?
- 5) In your understanding, what are the central dimensions of Comboni's spirituality?
- 6) Which of these dimensions affect you most deeply? Why?
- 7) What other sources (Scripture texts, teaching of the Church, etc.) nourish and shape your spirituality? Can you explain in what ways this happens in you?
- 8) How do these sources help you find relevant ways of being in mission?
- 9) How have the encounter with the people and the context changed the way you are in mission?
- 10) How is mission shaping your spirituality?
- 11) How does spirituality shape how you engage in mission?
- 12) How do you think this research can be beneficial to you and the congregation at-large in regard to how we live mission?
- 13) From your experience what new mission strategies (ways of being in mission) are emerging?
- 14) Do you think the term *ministeriality* is helpful in shaping the future of the Comboni Missionary Sisters? How?

In the course of the interviews, I decided, each time, what deviations to allow considering the nature of the deviation and its possible relevance to the theme areas. The presentation of the questions follows a logical order so that the different themes relevant to the research can be addressed. Free expression of an interviewee's ideas, thoughts, and experience are achieved through open-ended questions.

### **1.7.1 Sampling**

I employed theoretical sampling, by interviewing 15 Comboni Missionary Sisters aged between 39 and 80 years, who are working on different continents: Europe, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East. The number of Sisters I interviewed might seem small against a Congregation Membership of about 1250 Sisters.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the interview questions are quite open and the probability of receiving extensive and informative answers proved very good. I selected for interview three Provincial Superiors<sup>8</sup> from three different continents. A Provincial Superior has a broader view of the situation of the various communities of Sisters that she leads and of the various contexts in which those Sisters live and work. The contribution of the three Provincial Superior proved to be of great assistance to the research. Apart from those, I have identified for selection some Sisters whom I personally know and I was convinced that they could make a significant contribution to the theme of the research. In addition, having consulted a Sister who knows many Comboni Missionary Sisters, I have identified Sisters who are acknowledged as well established and exemplary members of the Congregation. The intended selection included a variety of ages to ensure a good insight into both past and future of the Congregation.

As hoped, the theoretical sampling allowed the collection of the different realities or contexts in which the Comboni Missionary Sisters live and work, and so enhanced the garnering of a greater variety of answers and perspectives. This also afforded me a wider view of the relevance of my research theme to the Congregation.

### **1.7.2 Interviews**

I conducted 13 interviews face-to-face, and 2 via the internet communication tool called Skype. The Sisters I interviewed are working in different continents. Most of the face-to-face interviews could take place as they participated in the General Chapter in September 2016 in Verona (Italy), in which I also participated. I was aware of the

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<sup>7</sup> Detailed information about the Comboni Missionary Sisters are given in Chapter Four.

<sup>8</sup> The Congregation of the Comboni Missionary Sisters is divided into Provinces (or Circumscriptions). Generally one country corresponds to a Province. In some cases, countries that have a small number of communities and Sisters, are joined together with other countries to form a Province. For instance, Ecuador, Peru and Colombia form one Province. Each Province is led by a Provincial Superior assisted by a four Sisters team, the Provincial Council.

limitations that an interview via Skype might involve, but I was not be able to reach physically all the Sisters where they are living and ministering.

At this point it is important to make clear that as the researcher I am an “insider” as I am a member of the congregation concerned. There are advantages and disadvantages to being an insider researcher. Various benefits are granted to an insider: participants generally show greater acceptance toward the researcher, they are more open and might feel more at ease to express their experiences. This allows the researcher to reach a greater depth in the interviews. An insider researcher also knows all the specialised terminology and structures of an organisation and can therefore understand and interpret what participants say against that background more easily than an outsider.

On the other hand, being an insider might be an impediment to the research process: “It is possible that participants will make assumptions of similarity, and therefore fail to explain their individual experience fully” (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle 2009:58). Moreover, the researcher’s perceptions might be influenced by her or his personal experience. An insider may also take certain things for granted that actually need to be explored and unpacked for a good research process. In that sense, an insider’s research may be less incisive and revealing than that of an outsider.

Therefore, as an insider I had to be aware of these aspects and try to take a reflexive approach throughout the interview in order to be honest, authentic and genuinely interested in the experience of participants.

Although I am an insider, I am actually the researcher. This means I am an outsider at the same time. Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009:61) put it clearly: “as researchers we can only ever occupy the space between ... we cannot fully occupy one or the other of those positions.” This concept of the space between is very important. As an *insider-outsider* I had to reflexively occupy “the space between” not only when I conducted interviews but throughout the research process.

All the interviews were recorded electronically, with the permission of the participants. I then transcribed the recordings verbatim.<sup>9</sup> As participants were guaranteed anonymity, the quotes from the interviews are indicated with P (Participant)

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<sup>9</sup> All the interview transcriptions are collected in a file that constitutes unpublished material. They remain at disposal of the examiners, who, if need be, can request them from the researcher.



followed by an alphabetical order listing (e.g. PA; PB; PC etc.) and the page of the transcribed interview.<sup>10</sup>

Before the interview, participants were informed that during the interviews I would take few notes focusing on emotions and any feelings that were emerging both from me and from them. After each interview I also wrote down my impressions and preliminary reflections on what was said, to aid me in my later rigorous analysis of the material.

I conducted 3 interviews in English. However, during one of these, the participant started mixing English with Italian. I realised that she felt more at ease with Italian. Thus, we decided to continue the interview in Italian.

For the participants who do not know English, the interview schedule was translated into Italian and the interview was conducted in Italian, which is the language of the Congregation. Some of the participants, who do not speak English and whose mother tongue is not Italian (but Spanish and Amharic), asked about the possibility of receiving the questions in advance. As a result, I decided to send the questions to all the participants one week before the interview. I did this to ensure that all the participants were treated in the same way.

It is worth mentioning that at the beginning of the interview, two participants asked to start with a prayer. During the interviews, I realised that, by listening to their stories, experiences, hopes, and struggles, I was on *holy ground*. The experience was for me so profound that I often felt urged to literally take off my sandals. This helped me to approach the participants in humility and with respect. The same happened when analysing the interviews. On the other hand, at some points during the interviews, I had to deliberately force myself to restrain my impatience, especially when participants digressed from the questions, and so to gently redirect them back to the topic.

### **1.7.3 Data analysis**

Data analysis is a process of inductive reasoning and thinking. It “is a process of bringing order, structure and meaning” to all the data collected by the researcher. The process consists of “breaking down the data and thematising them in ways which draw out the meaning hidden within the text” (Swinton & Mowat 2006:57).

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<sup>10</sup> The list of participant is attached as Appendix 1.

In the analysis of the data I first identified the main categories and then themes that emerged from these categories. I coded the themes into sub-themes. Through interpretative and reflective work, I explored the relationship that these themes and sub-themes might entail. Further, I gave meaning to the themes and sub-themes. Deep reflection on the interpretation followed, in the course of which inductive findings have been integrated within the dynamic of the *mission spirituality spiral*.

Participants' validation: I sent each participant the transcription of the interview and requested to provide feedback. They all acknowledged receipt. Some responded saying that they recognised themselves in the transcription, some others did not give a feedback from which I concluded that they were happy with the content. They also realised that verbatim interview transcriptions bear incomplete sentences and or words, repetitions, and grammar mistakes.

## **1.8 Ethical considerations**

### **1.8.1 Personal stance**

In conducting interviews I had to keep in mind that some participants might be interested in and might support my research, on the other hand, some may not find the topic relevant or important. I had to guard against the dangers of a judgmental bias in myself. I deliberately chose to approach each Sister with the same openness, attention and readiness to listen.

An added danger was the temptation to direct the answers with questions that were too narrow or manipulative in order to see my central contention that spirituality is the motor of mission supported. The questions were open enough to give the participants space for their answers. I made sure that the participants felt comfortable and unconstrained in expressing themselves. At the end of the interview, I asked each Sister how she felt during the interview.

Initially I was uncertain whether some of the participants might be afraid to answer the questions honestly, due to the fact that others would come to know that they were going to be interviewed and that it would make them self-conscious, so that they either withhold information or try to impress with their answers. As the interviews got underway, I discovered that my fears were unfounded, because I managed to create an

atmosphere of trust and a space of interpersonal freedom for the participants. At the end of the interview, all the participants recognised it and said that it had been a positive and enriching experience.

On another front, when reading the various publications of missiologists, it has become clear that spirituality does not feature significantly in their thinking. Yet, in my opinion, it is the *motor* of mission. This creates in me a certain disappointment that, at times, risks becoming judgmental. I realise that judgment may undermine the extremely relevant and important contributions of those missiologists. I always need to remember that I need interpretive humility when reading the works of missiologists who have for many years studied the subject and contributed to the academic field. I have, as it were, to be able to read *between the lines* of their works to sense the dimension of spirituality that is present but unacknowledged or unexpressed.

As a Catholic, I am aware that my theological perspective, and consequently my interpretations, differ from those of scholars belonging to other Christian denominations. This is also the case concerning spirituality.

On the one hand, such differences have broadened my horizons and increased my knowledge. On the other hand, I am challenged not to consider my way of thinking as better than others. The way to control my biases is the way of humility. I realise that, being exposed to and challenged by, other theological and missiological perspectives, I can grow in depth and become more rooted in my tradition, while at the same time being open to the richness of the differences among the traditions. In short, I am called to live the attitude “of both being rooted and winged at the same time” (Kritzinger 2002:145).

## **1.8.2 Other ethical considerations**

The informed consent form of all the participants in the research is attached as Appendix 2. Its formulation is in English but it was translated in Italian for the participants who do not know English and whose interviews were conducted in Italian.

The nature of this research is of such a nature that no possible harm could come to any of the participants as a result of the interviews. The questions did not probe any embarrassing aspects of a participant’s life, nor did it ask them to comment on any other Sister in the Congregation.

## 1.9 Literature review

When it became clear that the field I wanted to explore was mission spirituality, where spirituality and mission can interface, I searched literature for this topic and discovered that very little has been written on mission spirituality. This is true for both missiology and spirituality. In the first sub-section (1.9.1) I survey a number of key missiological publications to ascertain the extent to which they address spirituality. Then in the following sub-section (1.9.2) I survey publications on spirituality, to see whether they address mission in any way.

### 1.9.1 Missiological publications

Most of the key “theology of mission” texts that I examined, either neglect spirituality, or avoid it completely. A few others mention it but do not develop it in any depth.

Bosch, in the first part of *Transforming Mission* (1991), considers the various mission themes in the New Testament, with exception of the Johannine tradition. He explores the paradigm shifts in the history of missiology and concludes with a proposal that he calls an Emerging Ecumenical Missionary Paradigm, with thirteen elements. There is no explicit mention of spirituality to be found in Bosch’s considerations and arguments. Bosch emphasises the importance of the cross. For him the cross shows that mission can be realised in the experience of weakness, vulnerability, and kenosis (Bosch 1991:512-515). I would therefore deduce that his spirituality is kenotic in its nature.

In *A Spirituality of the Road* (1979), Bosch spells out a sense of unease with the word “spirituality” as it is often related to a “devotional life” and “seems to mean withdrawal from the world, charging my battery, and then going out into the world” (Bosch 1979:11). He, therefore, seeks a new definition of spirituality. He writes:

Fundamental to any definition of spirituality is that it can never be something that can be isolated from the rest of our existence ... The involvement in this world should lead to a deepening of our relationship with and the dependence on God, and the deepening of this relationship should lead to increasing involvement in the world (Bosch 1979:13).

At the same time it is not a question of finding a balance between intimacy with God and activity or keeping them “in a gentle tension” as Bosch (1979:15-16, 23) argues. I would contend that it is a continuous flow from intimacy to activity and from activity to intimacy in a harmonious integration.

Müller’s *Mission Theology* (1987) is written with an ecumenical dimension in mind. He accommodates different traditions in his missiological research. He explores mission in its foundations, its goals, and its works. Spirituality is not part of his missiological considerations.

The text *Missiology: An Ecumenical Introduction*, edited by Verstraelen and his colleagues (1995), presents missiology as a theological discipline linked to systematic theology. In five chapters, the text portrays the diversity of global Christianity, seeks to give a basic understanding of the one mission amidst the plurality of Christianity, reviews the history of the missionary movement, describes the diversity of Christianity in the different continents, and discusses the practice of missiology and the future of the missionary movement.

According to Verstraelen and colleagues, missiology has to be “the initiator and the mediator” (Verstraelen et al 1995:467) of the engagement of theology in the global context. This text is very valuable, as it not only supports an ecumenism encompassing all diversity, but also considers ecumenism as having the utmost relevancy for the further development of missiology. Regrettably, spirituality is not taken into consideration in their missiological thinking.

Shenk (1999:71-84) recognises six ways by which religious movements contribute to missiology. He explores the frontiers of contemporary culture. He rightly looks back in history, in order to be able to look forward, because “mission is future-driven” (Shenk 1999:183). Shenk emphasises eight trends that are relevant for the future of mission (:186-190). His exposition of spirituality in mission is limited to a brief mention of the importance of submission to the Holy Spirit and of an encounter with the Word, but without developing this in any significant way. This reduces the impact of changing frontiers of mission.

Compared to Bosch, Kirk (2000) introduces three innovative themes as integral parts of mission. These themes are: Overcoming violence and Building Peace; Care of the environment; and Sharing in partnership. His innovation results from a context analysis of various parts of the world (Kirk 2000:143-144, 164-169). The analysis shows that the social, political, and economic situation, as well as the ecclesial situation

(Kirk 2000: 184-186), in many countries of the world require these topics to be included on the missiological agenda. He does not engage with spirituality in his explorations. He just gives two brief hints of no more than two lines for each statement.

In his later book *Mission Under Scrutiny*, Kirk (2006:218-219) emphasises that one of the characteristics of a radical discipleship is *following*. It is the desire to be like Christ. For this kind of discipleship the author pleads for a practical spiritual life that trusts in the Holy Spirit to transform and guide the individual disciple. Yet, this aspect is not explored in much depth.

Oborji (2006) starts his book by exploring the concept of mission in contemporary missiology. From a Catholic perspective he engages with the Second Vatican Council and the post conciliar developments (Oborji 2006:4-40). He explores six historical perspectives plus some new perspectives in mission. Like Bosch (1991), Oborji does this by using the phrase *mission as*. He wisely emphasises inculturation, intercultural and ecumenical dialogue, and the African model of the church-family. Oborji spells out the differences, the divergences, and also the way ahead in Catholic-Protestant and Catholic-Evangelical dialogue. He identifies areas that are relevant for these Ecumenical efforts (Oborji 2006:153-180).

In the third part of the book Oborji (2006:181-205) deals with mission and contextual theologies. The author engages critically with “Third World theologies” from a Catholic perspective. He highlights their two main foci, namely Christology and the quest for human promotion or liberation. He outlines the basic principles of these theologies arising from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Oborji does not engage with spirituality in his missiological thoughts.

In his book *Mission in the New Millennium*, Ahonen (2000) focuses on the Trinitarian foundation of mission. He explores mission in the New Testament, and then engages with the theological topic of the uniqueness of Christ. Chapter Four is dedicated to the Holy Spirit in mission (Ahonen 2000:96-120). The author defines the Holy Spirit as the guide of mission. However, Ahonen does not connect this insight with spirituality as intimacy with the Triune God, or develop this insight methodologically as an integral part of his missiology.

I found only a few books in which authors consider spirituality as a central dimension of mission and missiology. One of them is the manual of missiology by Giuseppe Buono (2002). He divides missiology into four spheres: the theological, the anthropological, the historical and the mission praxis. In the latter, he recognises the

importance of needing to particularly reflect on mission spirituality. He recalls that mission spirituality was addressed for the first time by the Catholic Church in *Ad gentes* 29. The church, by evangelising, has to provide a soul to society. For Buono, “spirituality is the soul of mission and evangelization because it changes from within the heart of the human being” (2002:121). It is through spirituality that mission can be credibly brought forth, “[s]pirituality makes the evangelizer a visible sign of Christ and a sacrament of his love” (Buono 2002:122). The essence of spirituality is, in Buono’s view, the intimate “encounter and communion with God-Trinity” (2002:123). This relationship with God leads to contemplation. Buono states that “contemplation is mission, and mission in its original movement, is contemplation” (124). It is a pity that Buono, in spite of his admission in regard to the centrality of spirituality to mission, does not develop these ideas in great depth.

In the book *Following Christ in Mission*, Karotemprel (1995), as editor, seems to be more attentive to fundamental principles that sustain mission rather than to what is required for mission praxis. He emphasises the theology of mission. Contran (1995:131-139), in his contribution to the book, considers prayer and contemplation as the “essential foundation of mission spirituality” (1995:135). In fact, for him, mission does not depend primarily on human resources. For Contran, discipleship and mission are linked. In his words, “[d]iscipleship and mission constitute the essence of all missionary spirituality” (1995:138). This affirmation is relevant given the focus of my research. A deep spirituality made of encounter and of relationship with God, nourishes and produces growth in discipleship of Jesus. As a disciple, one is called to participate in the mission of Jesus, living and announcing the Good News.

The preparation for the Edinburgh 2010 conference, that celebrated the centenary of the Edinburgh 1910 World Missionary Conference, engaged with the theme of mission spirituality. This theme, as an academic commitment, is considered “a new frontier in missiology and is crucial for deeper understanding of mission and world Christianity” (Pachau 2013:ix).

In 2011, the text *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow* (Kim & Anderson 2011) was published with the themes that had been discussed at the conference. Mission Spirituality and Authentic Discipleship was Theme 9. The participants discussing this theme “realized that our mission shapes our spirituality and our spirituality is shaped by our mission so that our spirituality, mission and discipleship become an integral whole” (Kim & Anderson 2011:189).

At the conclusion of the study process it emerged that:

spirituality is not an additional dimension of mission to be considered when all the doctrinal and practical apparatus is already in place. Rather, the spiritual dimension is the first thing around which everything else ought to revolve. Since God is the primary agent of mission and God works through the power of the Holy Spirit, it is through openness to the Spirit that mission takes effect in human life (Ma & Ross 2013:8-9).

The book that was published after the conference contains contributions of scholars from various denominations. For example, Moses Morales (2013:93) makes use of the *Aparecida Document* (AD 138-139) to emphasise that if we want to carry out mission, we have to be in communion with the Master.

According to Ojo, the cause of “frequent and deep-rooted moral failures and corruption among Christians who hold political power and are in leadership positions” (2013:49) on the African continent lies in a series of disconnections between (African or Christian) spirituality and morality, development praxis, governance, quality of education, and quest to provide quality leadership (2013:49-51). Only when these disconnections can be removed, will the church be in a better position to carry out mission.

In *Constants in Context*, Bevans and Schroeder (2004:1) develop “a historical, systematic theology,” of which mission is the very core, “and a systematic theological history of the church’s missionary practice” with its “contextual Christian and doctrinal traditions.” They lay biblical and theological foundations with the Acts of the Apostles and then they define the six constants in mission (Christology, Ecclesiology, Eschatology, Salvation, Anthropology, and Culture) within each of the three different types of theology.<sup>11</sup> These constants within the types of theology are then explored in each of the six mission periods.

In the last chapter of their book, the authors define mission as prophetic dialogue and identify “six essential components” of mission (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:351). The second one is Liturgy, Prayer and Contemplation.

They state that “prayer [I add contemplation] and liturgy are the centre of Christian life, and yet (paradoxically) that centre will only hold if the eyes of Christians are not on the centre but on its periphery” (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:362).

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<sup>11</sup> Bevans and Schroeder (2004) use the typology of Justo L. González who distinguishes between: Type A: orthodox/conservative theology; Type B: liberal theology; Type C: radical/liberation theology.



Furthermore, they show how liturgy (in particular the Eucharistic celebration), prayer and contemplation are really components of mission (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:362-368).

I found support for my quest for an interface between spirituality and mission in various articles by Kritzinger (2002; 2008; 2011; 2013) and in his book (Kritzinger & Saayman 2011). In his missiological thinking he places spirituality at the centre of what he calls the “praxis matrix.” The matrix is composed of seven dimensions. These are: *agency, contextual understanding, ecclesial scrutiny, interpreting the tradition, discernment for action, reflexivity, and spirituality* (2008:764-790; 2011:50-52; 2013:37-38). By placing spirituality as heart of the matrix, Kritzinger emphasises that the other dimensions flow from it. The questions related to the different dimensions (e.g. Who are the actors? How do they read the signs of times? What is the underlying spirituality?) are intended to stimulate and deepen reflection on mission and its execution. This missiological approach is a great achievement as it integrates theology and praxis of mission. Yet, the praxis matrix, as it is drawn by Kritzinger, seems to me a bit static. I have the impression that the different dimensions remain separated from one another, and therefore with little interdependence.

I also find complete support in considering spirituality the centre of mission and missiology in Karecki’s contributions (2005; 2012). In her article *Mission Spirituality in Global Perspective*, she states that a reflection “on how missiology interfaces with spirituality and how spirituality affects mission praxis” (Karecki 2012:23) is of the utmost importance and necessity. This assertion is relevant for different reasons. As both spirituality and missiology are interdisciplinary they can enrich each other. On the one hand, spirituality is an essential component of mission praxis and can enhance mission with profundity and meaning in the different contexts where it takes place. On the other hand, missiology can enrich spirituality through the contextualised and lived experience. Moreover, *encounter* is for both disciplines fundamental. Christian spirituality is based on the *encounter* with the Triune God through the sacraments, prayer and contemplation, the Word, in everyday life, especially amidst the poor and marginalised. Missiology has to reflect critically on mission through a series of *encounters* – with the others, with the context, and with the Scripture and Tradition. All these *encounters* have to be studied through a dialogical approach that can enhance a mutual enrichment of missiology and spirituality.

Reilly, in *Spirituality for Mission* (1978), seeks to explore the foundations of mission spirituality. Although the book is somewhat dated, it tries to give an exhaustive overview of mission spirituality. After recognising the need of a new spirituality for mission based on the contemporary context of mission, Reilly engages with spirituality and its sources. They are Scripture, Theology, culture, and Tradition (Reilly 1978:22-43). Through exploring mission spirituality across the ages, Reilly considers some important mission figures.

He then describes the foundations of mission and the nature of the church. He engages with the goals of mission, the identification of the missionary and the relationship between Christian denominations (in particular the Catholic Church) and other religious traditions. The last part of the book is positively concerned with the cultural situation of the 1970s with its different facets.

Two Church documents are also relevant: the *Aparecida Document* (2007) and *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013). Both documents emphasise the importance of an encounter that becomes the foundation of a relationship with the Triune God.

The term encounter (with Jesus) occurs 48 times in the *Aparecida Document*.<sup>12</sup> The document lists the different places in which an encounter with Jesus can happen (AD 246-265). The Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean regard the encounter with Jesus as of the utmost importance in the missionary life of the church. The proposal of encounter with Jesus that they highlight, is a personal and a community one and “must be established upon a solid foundation of Trinity-Love” (AD 240). The Church is therefore called to foster “an encounter with the living Christ” (AD 99), which – as I will argue in Chapter Two (2.2.3) – is the actual goal of mission.

A few years after the *Aparecida Document* (2007), the Cardinal of Buenos Aires (Argentina) became Pope Francis. It is therefore not surprising that in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) various similarities with the *Aparecida Document* can be found. One of these is the necessity of an encounter with Jesus Christ.<sup>13</sup> At the beginning of *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Pope invites all Christians “to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ” (EG 3). Throughout the Exhortation the encounter with God remains fundamental. In Chapter Five, the Pope insists that without

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<sup>12</sup> The *Aparecida Document* is the concluding document of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, who gathered in Aparecida, Brazil, from 13 to 31 May 2007. The theme of the Conference was “Disciples and Missionaries of Jesus Christ, so that our peoples may have life in Him.”

<sup>13</sup> In the Apostolic Exhortation, the term encounter occurs 32 times, of which 18 times it refers to the encounter with God, Jesus, and the Word.

this encounter evangelisation cannot (effectively) be brought forth. That is why “... prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the word, of sincere conversation with the Lord ...” (EG 262) are essential.

Drawing upon these insights, I regard the encounter with the Triune God as the core of mission. Without this encounter and without a durable relationship arising from this encounter, there can be no discipleship, and there can be no mission. I will expand on this assumption in Chapter Two (2.2.3).

The Comboni Missionary Sisters possess sources relating to the mission spirituality of their founder, Daniel Comboni. These include a collection of the letters he sent during his life. I drew on that correspondence for a consideration of his spirituality. Documents emanating from the Comboni Missionary Sisters are also taken into consideration. These documents include circular letters by the General Superiors to the Sisters, the Rule of Life,<sup>14</sup> the Acts of Symposiums, and the Acts<sup>15</sup> of the General Chapters. In Chapters Three and Four I deal at length with the above and integrate my sources.

My quest concerning the role of spirituality in missiology has shown that a good number of scholars do not (explicitly) take spirituality into consideration. On the other hand, I also found that the contributions of spirituality scholars I consulted likewise do not consider missiology in their arguments. These sources are addressed in the section following.

## 1.9.2 Spirituality publications

In his magisterial book, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundation, Methods* Waaijman (2002:368-424) considers the importance of intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives. By reflecting on the relationship between spirituality and theology he sees a possibility of interdisciplinary cooperation with exegesis, church history, systematic theology, liturgy, dogmatic, moral theology, and pastoral theology. Unfortunately, he does not consider a (possible) connection with and relationship to missiology.

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<sup>14</sup> The Comboni Missionary Sisters call their constitutions “Regola di Vita” (Rule of Life) of 1987. The references to this document will be RoL followed by the number of the paragraph.

<sup>15</sup> The Acts of the General Chapters, which contain the decisions taken during the General Chapters, are officially called by the Comboni Missionary Sisters *Chapter Acts*. Therefore, they will be quoted as follows: CA (for Chapter Acts), followed by the year of publication and the number in the Chapter Acts.

Schneiders' approach to spirituality is hermeneutical. Writing about the formal object of the discipline she states that it "seeks to interpret the experience it studies in order to make it understandable and meaningful in the present without violating its historical reality" (1998:40). Moreover, she sees a three-phase procedure in numerous research projects. These are a "'thick' description of the aspect of experience to be studied, critical analysis of the phenomenon under scrutiny, and constructive interpretation" (Schneiders 1998:40).<sup>16</sup>

In various articles, Schneiders (1986; 1989; 1993; 2005) is convinced that the academic study of spirituality is distinct from classical theological studies, while, at the same time, it is related to them. Spirituality is in her opinion an interdisciplinary academic discipline. Schneiders (1998) identifies constitutive disciplines (Scripture and the history of Christianity) and problematic<sup>17</sup> ones (psychology, sociology, literature, science or others that allow better access to the experiential aspect of the object under investigation). Theology, in her opinion, belongs to both the constitutive and the problematic disciplines (Schneiders 1998:42).

In her articles, she does not consider an interface between missiology and spirituality. However, in her contribution to *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, she deals with different approaches to spirituality. In explaining the anthropological approach, she makes a remark that, though not explicitly mentioning missiology and spirituality, brings the two disciplines into dialogue. She states:

The question that was once posed as how Christianity could propagate itself and its gospel message for the salvation of the world has been recast as how Christian spirituality is related to other versions of the human quest for ultimate meaning and value, what Christian can learn from others as well as offer to others in terms of the spiritual life, and how all those interested in the future of the human race and the planet can mobilize the resources of their respective traditions to transform the lives of their own adherents for the ultimate good of all (Schneiders 2011: 27).

The challenge – and at the same time a unique opportunity – for the anthropological approach is to keep Christian identity in focus and not to lose itself in

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<sup>16</sup> Although Schneiders does not explain these three phases, I deem it important to highlight them in my understanding. In order to properly study an experience, it needs an accurate description. Also, a critical analysis has to be conducted in order to consider and scrutinise all the aspects of the experience. Further, the experience or phenomenon has to be interpreted in a constructive way in order to make it comprehensible and meaningful today without spoiling its historical reality.

<sup>17</sup> Schneiders (1998:42) considers these disciplines problematic because "they are called into play and integrated into the methodology of a particular study because of the problematic of the phenomena being studied ... the object of the study is *experience as such*."

“relativism, nihilist deconstructionism, rejection of all tradition and authority, and suspicion of personal commitment” (Schneiders 2011:28).

Rakoczy, in her book *Great Mystics & Social Justice* (2006), explores how the apparent dichotomy between prayer and action, prayer and working for justice is overcome in the lives of some mystics. The relationships between prayer and action, and a commitment for justice, are explored at a ground level. It does not involve an academic discourse between spirituality or mysticism and missiology.

Kourie and Kretzschmar both have a holistic and integrated concept of contemporary spirituality. This concept involves and affects the whole person and her whole life. It is therefore non-dualistic. It does not acknowledge a separation between the secular and the sacred. These scholars do not consider spirituality as individualistic. The community and the social aspects cannot be ignored. (Kourie 2000:13; Kretzschmar 2000:41-41).

Bühlmann (1997:416) in the *Dictionary of Mission* engages with mysticism and politics:

On the one hand, a mysticism without politics would probably not even be genuine and would remain a rather cheap indulgence in loving God. Politics without mysticism, on the other hand, risks engendering a gigantic state with the capacity for brutal domination by the powerful. For that reason there should be cultivated not just a vertical mysticism for the redemption of individual souls but also a horizontal mysticism-in-solidarity for the liberation of the whole world.

This statement is relevant. It combines mysticism and politics, contemplation and action. Should the one or the other be missing, a distortion of the element that is there would occur. For this reason both mysticism and politics – both the vertical and the horizontal transcendence – have to be part of the missiological agenda. At the same time, however, this approach does not consider an interface between spirituality and missiology.

Dinh Duc Dao (2000) shows the essential relevance of spirituality in the life and mission of the church in Asia. Spirituality is considered as the foundation and strength that permeates all arguments on mission, giving them reason, quality and character (Dinh Duc Dao 2000:221-222).

The conclusion of the special Synod of the Catholic Bishops in Asia mentions the need of a deep mission spirituality, rooted in Christ, with particular emphasis on

compassion and harmony, detachment and renouncement of self, solidarity with the poor and the suffering, and respect for creation (Dinh Duc Dao 2000:223-234).

Sheldrake, in his article *Christian Spirituality as a Way of Living Publicly*, underlines the “intimate link between Christian discipleship, including the association between public, social, and human identity and Trinitarian theology” (2003:26). He argues that when reflecting on the public, social nature of spirituality, it is important to include the notion of mission and discipleship. Moreover, Sheldrake states that “the mystical-contemplative dimension of spirituality ... is a vital ingredient of our engagement with transformative practice in the outer, public world” (2003:25).

Gittins (2005:443) admits that it is not evident that mission occupies a central place in the academic field of spirituality. However, he states that “Walbert Bühlmann asserted that “missionary spirituality” is not one among many spiritualities but an essential feature of every genuine spirituality.”

Luzbetak (1988:1-2) identifies theological assumptions for a missiological anthropology. The first assumption is the primacy of the Holy Spirit. In mission activities planning, although important, is not everything and does not replace the work of the Holy Spirit in inspiring mission activity. As a matter of fact, it is essential to remember, that without the Holy Spirit, no mission activity that is worthy of this name, can be brought forth. He refers to Church documents (LG 1-5; GS 2; EN 75) to support his perspective on the work of the Holy Spirit and mission.

The second theological assumption is the need for spirituality: “The most important and most desirable ingredient in a person engaged in mission is genuine and deep spirituality” (Luzbetak 1988:2). He emphasises that the missionary has to be “dedicated to prayer and in constant union with God” (:2). His or her spirituality has, according to this author, some definite characteristics. These are: a living faith, that is “a personal theocentric oneness and wholeness” and total belonging to God; a dedication to the needs of others through selfless and humble service; a self-immolation, meaning a daily self-giving and sacrifice of one’s ways and values; a total and unshakable trust in God (:3-7).

The third assumption is the importance of human knowledge. The Holy Spirit is certainly the protagonist of mission. However, the Holy Spirit must have a human partner with his or her knowledge in order to make the mission activity more fruitful (:8). Jesus himself made use of oratorical and pedagogical approaches by proclaiming the Good News. He inculturated and contextualised it, especially in the parables like the

prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32), the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:1-18) the Good Samaritan (Lk 10: 25-37) (Luzbetak 1988:9; cf. Lohfink 2012:100-120). Also Paul, in the Acts of Apostles (19:8), is described by his ability for debating, for arguing persuasively about the Kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit does not perform magic. Rather, the Spirit needs a human being who gets involved in mission and is willing to use all the gifts that he/she has received from the very same Spirit (Luzbetak 1988:9).

The World Council of Churches makes a very important statement: “The church in mission can only be sustained by spiritualities deeply rooted in the Trinity’s communion of love. Spirituality gives our lives their deepest meaning” (TTL 29). In the same document the WCC takes a strong position by affirming “*that spirituality is the source of energy for mission and that mission in the Spirit is transformative*” (TTL 104). I fully agree with this affirmation. A genuine spirituality is the core of mission and “is always transformative” (TTL 30). It has the power to bring transformation in contexts where life and its values are in danger or even destroyed, whether this be in society or in churches.

From this short literature review on spirituality emerges the need of linking spirituality to action. It can however be lamented that the authors do not involve in academic discourse between spirituality and missiology. This indicates the necessity of engaging in an interface between the two disciplines.

## **1.10 Special terminology**

Terminology is central to research. It is important to clarify what is meant by the key terms that are used, not only for the integrity of the project but also to communicate clearly to the reader. In this section I define some of the terms that are central to my study.

### **1.10.1 Religious congregation**

One of the meanings of the Latin word *ordo* is *rule*, which refers to a religious order of a congregation or institute of Christian men or women who share a common *rule* of life (Macy 2007:983).

There are three types of religious institutes: religious *orders*, whose members profess solemn vows and share common life, religious *congregations* whose members profess simple vows,<sup>18</sup> and secular *institutes* whose members commit themselves to the vows but do not necessarily live a common life. In all the religious institutes – whether order or congregation, monastic or apostolic – the members commit themselves permanently (*ad vitam*) to live the evangelical counsels or vows of poverty, chastity, obedience. Some orders also add other vows like stability (Casey 1987:873).

The recognition of these institutes by the Catholic Church occurs when their constitutions are approved by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (Propaganda Fide) or by the Congregations of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. The constitutions, or the rule of life, give form to the life of the members. These differ according to the purpose for which they were founded (Casey 1987:870).<sup>19</sup>

The Comboni Missionary Sisters are a religious congregation founded in 1872 by Daniel Comboni. With his prophetic intuition, he recognised the utmost importance of involving consecrated women in the evangelisation of Africa.

Religious life is a prophetic sign in the Church as it is a work of the Holy Spirit. Religious life is a response to the needs of society. It generally lives out solidarity, especially among the marginalised and the oppressed. Through the mark of newness given by the Holy Spirit, religious life is often “expressed in the creativity and surprise of the Spirit” (Milligan 2005:537) that in particular moments in history grants a special grace and the courage to take new steps.

One of these important moments was the Second Vatican Council. The Vatican Council’s *Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life (Perfectae Caritatis)* invited each religious order to return to the sources of their founders and to the documents and stories since the foundation of the order. As the Decree puts it: “The adaptation and renewal of the religious life includes both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time” (PC 2). By “the original spirit of the institutes” the document means the charism received by the founder of the religious institute.

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<sup>18</sup> These are the communities that are not affiliated to one of the religious orders who had a Rule before the Fourth Lateran Council.

<sup>19</sup> All of these religious institutes are popularly referred to as religious orders.



As stated above, religious life is a prophetic sign in the life of the Church. At the same time, it is a real challenge to live up to the ideal of the founder or foundress. In his/her vision, founders are often ahead of their contemporaries.<sup>20</sup> They are often extraordinary persons. Inspired by the Holy Spirit they see opportunities where others see only problems. Founders commit themselves with extraordinary courage and confidence in God without being overcome by fear of the difficulties that they encounter in the realisation of the undertaking to which they feel called.

Therefore, to live up to their ideal is a real challenge for those who are called to follow in their footsteps. On one hand, religious life is a challenge because a person has to leave his or her home, family, work, etc. On the other hand, religious life grants security to a member, as house and “bed and board” are guaranteed. This security and privilege can become an enticement to live at a superficial level, developing selfishness and other attitudes and therefore failing to live religious life in fullness.

### 1.10.2 Charism

Charism (in Greek *cari,sma*) is a gift given by God through the Holy Spirit. Paul describes these gifts in his first letter to the Corinthians (12:8-10). A charism is given to a person or group in order to make present a specific aspect of the mystery and ministry of Christ. A charism is a particular expression of Gospel life. As a gift from God, it is given for the good of all (Harrington 1997:180). This is the mystical-spiritual dimension of charism. The other dimension of a charism is the apostolic activity. It is the way of responding to a concrete human situation or *cry* from the world. Each charism is expressed in a life-style; it shapes the whole way of approaching the ministry. Religious orders and congregations came to life thanks to a particular person or group who received a particular charism from God, in order to respond to the needs of the church and society in a particular time in history (Downey 2005:184-185).

The particular experience of the person or the group who received the charism, gave birth to a specific spirituality and a spiritual tradition that grew in depth and

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<sup>20</sup> On example may suffice. Daniel Comboni (To Monsignor Luigi Curcia 15.2.1870, in *Writings*:2066; 2181; Plan for the Regeneration of Africa 1871, in *Writings*:2742) considered Africans as brothers and sisters, children of the same Father in heaven, while Europeans were still debating if Africans had a soul.

All quotations from the *Writings* of Comboni will indicate the person to whom the letter is addressed, or the title of the document, followed by the date and the numbering of the writing.

specificity as time and generations passed by. This means that the charism, received and unfolded by the founder in a particular way and ministry, must also be a gift to the people of God here and now. For this reason, as times and needs of the church and society change, the concrete expressions of a charism of religious orders and congregations are to be constantly discerned.

### **1.10.3 Discernment**

The Greek word *diakrisis*, at a figurative level, entails the observation of difference, of division, and the perception of tension. From here, we have the verbs to judge, to discern, and to distinguish. Discernment is a process, not a method (Healey 2009:59), by which we assemble and sort out knowledge about the way to God; we speak here of spiritual discernment (Waaïjman 2002:484). In the process, we undergo a critical reflection on the human and religious experience (Haight 2012:59). We need this process of critical reflection because our experiences are rooted in ambiguities. It is through the Holy Spirit that we can discern the will of God for us. In discernment, the relationship between the Holy Spirit and us, between what the Holy Spirit does and what we do, is very important. Therefore, in discernment, we need to be totally open to the Holy Spirit.

In discernment, *sentir* (word used by St Ignatius of Loyola), that is felt-knowledge, means “a concrete, psychological movement of personal consciousness involving at the same time the continuity of thoughts during reflection, the concomitant feelings constantly reacting to these thoughts ... and the acts of understanding which involves both the thoughts and the feelings” (Futrell 1970:113).

The certitude of discernment is a limit. In fact, one cannot have a scientific certitude when discerning. The result of discernment cannot be absolutely sure and cannot be proved. One can have only a “subjective certitude” (Astorga 2014:486).

Arrupe (2004) sees conversion as a prerequisite for discernment. As he puts it, conversion “is getting rid of something so that something else can take its place. It is getting rid of everything that prevent us from being filled with the Holy Spirit; from being completely at the disposal of that Spirit which Jesus promised to send” (Arrupe 2004:96).

I agree with Arrupe that conversion is a prerequisite for discernment. At the same time, it is an ongoing attitude to which the discerning person has to commit him/herself in order to be more and more open to the Spirit. It is an attitude that enables a person to test him/herself during, after, and in the execution of what has been discerned.

The discernment developed by St Ignatius of Loyola who lived and taught it, is a process that consists essentially in “discerning and distinguishing the good spirits from the bad and then acting accordingly” (Healey 2009:63 ). This process leads the person or a group to make sound and good decisions. The context of discernment can only be prayer as it concerns the deepest part of a person. However, the purpose of discernment is to find a practical application in everyday life.

Therefore, as far as (we) missiologists are concerned, this process is not only important in our spiritual life but also when we embark on mission. It is a process that happens at a deeper spiritual level through prayer, critical reflection and through pondering ways of being in mission that seek to bring transformation in a particular context. Since the Second Vatican Council the faithful are strongly invited to remember that “the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (GS 4) and to act accordingly. Pope Francis exhorts the communities to scrutinise the signs of the times and choose “movements of the spirit of good” (EG 51).

Lonsdale (1992:102-108) explains that, before taking a decision regarding their future, St. Ignatius and his companions agreed upon the method of a communal discernment. This method can also be used in a discernment process for new ways of being in mission. There must be a common basis for discernment upon which the group agrees. The group is aware that there are different opinions about how to achieve this end. It is indispensable that each member takes time for prolonged and assiduous prayer to receive enlightenment from God. Each member must be fully informed about the situation – I call this context analysis. Each member has to make sure that the conclusion at which he/she has arrived is as objective as possible. In sharing the personal decision with the others, one has to be able to trust and to humbly listen to the others. As the whole process has been led by the Holy Spirit, the moment of taking the decision is not merely a matter of the majority, as in a democracy. Rather, it happens in openness and depth, where biases, prejudices and the desire of seeing one’s own decision to be adopted, have to be set aside.

### 1.10.4 Transformative Encounter

*Encounter* does not merely consist of being together with another in the same space at the same time. It is not only being face-to-face, nor simply receiving and giving information, nor is it based on the will to know about the other. It is something more. It is a free act of *being with* another person, participation in the existence of the other (Schrey 1970:85-86).

Encounter is never possessive but leaves the other person free to be who he/she is. Encounter has a two-way movement, in which both interlocutors are interacting as subjects, listening to each other, enriching each other, and creating new perspectives. In all these encounters, the interlocutors are invited to “remove the sandals” from their feet (Ex 3:5) and to recognise that the place (context) on which they are staying, the person(s) and the Word we are encountering, are *holy ground*. The image of Max Warren (in Bevans & Schroeder 2011:76) “of entering someone else’s ‘garden’ by ‘taking off one’s shoes’” can be recalled here.

Genuine encounters, where the interlocutors “participate” with one another, are by their essence transformative. The interlocutors do not remain the same. Their lives experience transformation that they can bring into the church, and into society at large.

Therefore, a mission encounter can be defined as such when certain criteria are met. I am using the phrase *mission encounter*, where mission is intended as an adjective. I am not using the phrase *missiological encounter* because such an encounter does not happen on the ground but rather at theoretical level. Also the adjectives *missionary* and *missional* are not suitable. *Missionary* might have a colonial, and therefore, negative connotation. *Missional* is mostly utilised in Protestant circles, in UK and the USA.

Firstly, the encounter must be moved and inspired by the Holy Spirit. A Spirit-filled person has a greater chance to encounter the other in true solidarity. Secondly, we need a *two-way* encounter, in which both interlocutors are interacting as subjects (*auf Augenhöhe* – face-to-face), listening to each other and enriching each other. Thirdly, a mission encounter must be creative, that is, it has to open the mind and the horizons of the interlocutors, creating new perspectives and possibilities. Fourthly, a mission encounter must be transformative, that is, it has to bring transformation (or conversion) in the lives of the interlocutors, in the church, and in society at large.

At this point it has to be said that a mission encounter is meant to occur particularly with the poor and excluded; a privileged place of encounter with God.

From what has been said, it clearly appears how important encounter is to the development of mission spirituality. The different dimensions of the encounter have to be studied in a process (what I call the *mission spirituality spiral*) that will be explained in Chapter Two (2.4.2). Here it suffices to mention that I find myself in agreement with Kritzinger (2013:38), who defines missiology as *encounterology*: “the critical reflection on the dynamics of the encounter between forms of Christian praxis and the other forms of faith praxis.”

### 1.10.5 Praxis

The word *praxis* comes from the Greek and means *practice* or *activity* but it is not merely a synonym for it. In theology it is used particularly by liberation theologians, missiologists and practical theologians.

For liberation theologians praxis is knowledge at its most intensive level. It is a combination of reflection and action (reflective action) so as to engage a community in a more effective way. For them, praxis is discerning the meaning and then contributing to the course of social change. Liberation theologians insist that it is not only about hearing the Word, rather, it is also doing it. As James puts it: “But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves” (Jas 1:22). It is then evident that for these theologians the starting point of praxis is the community, the context in which social change needs to be carried out (Bevans 2002:70-71). As consequence, theology is understood as the product of the continual dialogue of faith and commitment to change.

According to Kritzinger (2002:149-150), praxis has three characteristics. It is *collective* as it takes place in the Christian community, *transformative* as it has to bring transformation into the church and the society, and *holistic* or *integrative* as the different dimensions of praxis are in constant interplay and balance.

Praxis does not simply replace thought with act and word with deed. It rather ensures “that thinking is rooted in existence – and committed to its transformation” (Hall 1991:21).

Therefore, according to Bosch, the debate about whether theology should start with experience and *praxis* (from below) or with *theory* (from above), where the one or

the other can be absolutised and posited before the other one is no longer possible. Praxis and theory are both subjects and cannot simply be juxtaposed. They need each other, one cannot exist without the other. Orthopraxis and Orthodoxy have to walk together in creative tension (Bosch 1991:425-426, 431-432). I agree that orthopraxis and orthodoxy need each other and neither of them can be absolutised. However, I find myself in agreement with the liberation theologians, like Gutiérrez and Boff, in emphasising that the starting point for theological and missiological reflection is the reality in which we live. It is starting from the reality, or context, from the experience lived in that context that we can engage with theological and missiological reflection.

Pope Francis also highlights that “[i]deas – conceptual elaborations – are at the service of communication, understanding, and praxis. Ideas disconnected from realities... [are] certainly not calling to action” (EG 232).

### **1.10.6 Contemplation and mysticism**

The word contemplation originates from the Latin *templum* which was the “place in the heavens where the soothsayer discerned for a client the design of God. Hence *templum* or temple became the dwelling place of gods” (Egan 2005:211).

The term contemplation has been used with a wide range of meanings in religious contexts including Christian contexts. Egan (2005:211) defines it as “an intensification of a transforming awareness of divine presence. Contemplation transforms one’s spiritual resources and effects a deeper practice of virtue.”

However, it is more than awareness. I prefer to understand contemplation as *being totally present* to the divine presence. When totally present to God in a loving encounter, an inner transformation occurs in that person. The effects of this transformation will also impact upon the lives of those around him or her.

The term mysticism is derived from the Greek *mystērion* (*mystery*) and the adjective *mystikos* (*mystical*). It is related to the verb *myein* (to close). This conveys to a sense of something that is hidden or secret. Its Semitic background lays in the fact that the ancient Israelites thought that God is staying above the firmament of the sky, surrounded by a group of heavenly advisors (Job 1:6) or divine council (Ps 82:1). God would consult them before taking any final decision. Some humans were allowed to be part of this divine assembly. These were the prophets who would, then, share the divine

secrets to humans. The gospel according to Mark refers to “the secret [*mystērion*] of the Kingdom of God” that has been given to the disciples, “but for those outside, everything comes in parables” (Mk 4:11). Other references are to be found in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians (4:1; 2:7) and in the letters of the Pauline school: Eph 3:4; Col 1:26-27 (Wiseman 2006:7-8).

Nevertheless, there is no definition on which authors throughout the world agree. Although many mystics use the language of union with God, the definition can be taken in a broader way. McGinn (2005:19-25) underlines three characteristics of mysticism. First, it is an element of a religion and not the core of it. Second, it is “a process, a life commitment to attaining God” (:19). Thus, contemplation cannot be reduced or confined to a particular moment. There are moments of union but they are not all there is; they are preceded by preparation and followed by a personal and communal transformation. Third, mysticism, for McGinn, is presence rather than union.

Sheldrake does not agree that the heart, or goal, of mysticism is union. According to him, “union with God is the precondition of all human spiritual development rather than simply its most advanced stage.” (Sheldrake 2010:110). I find myself in complete agreement with him. Every human being, having been created in the image and likeness of God, is made for union with God. “Union with God” is a possibility open and granted to everyone as creature, although not everybody has the same opportunity to engage with this possibility. It has to be remarked that Jesus did not intend to be the only one to “experience an intimacy with God as his *Abba*. God was the *Abba* and Father of all” (Nolan 2006:106).

Throughout the centuries the meaning of mystic changed and was more and more referred to the affective side so that it became “a special state of consciousness surpassing ordinary experience through union with the transcendent reality of God” (Wiseman 2006:9). It was therefore identified with some extraordinary or paranormal experience that is more and more distinct from the ordinary Christian life, and often as an experience resulting from unhealthy psychological phenomena. There have been in some cases psychological problems. However, the human person is created to encounter and enter into a relationship with God. It is certainly not an individual person who decides how God wants to reveal Godself. God’s manifestation pertains to God, be it total presence or union. Therefore, I will not take the matter further. I do, however, agree with McGinn (2005:19) in considering mysticism a lifelong process, in which a person – any person and not only an elite – seeks to be in relationship with God.

Thanks to the Second Vatican Council the universal call to holiness led to a retreat from the distinction between a mystical and an earthly or ordinary way of Christian life. I am in full agreement with Karl Rahner (1981:144), who wrote that “the Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all.” He continues explaining that mysticism is “a genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence.” This statement is relevant for mission and missiology; it is from this experience or encounter that persons may enter and participate in mission.

### **1.10.7 *Ministeriality***

The Comboni Missionary Sisters formulated their definition of the term *ministeriality* at the General Chapter of 2010. With (Combonian) *ministeriality*, they mean “the style of our presence and service, a way of being disciples [and apostles] of the Risen Lord, sharing the great passion of our Founder” (CA 2010:18). From this definition, it appears clearly that the first characteristic of *ministeriality* is not activities to be carried out but a style of presence. “Being” precedes “doing.” *Ministeriality* starts, therefore, with a kind of presence like that of the disciples, who stay with and follow Jesus. The activities or ministries that will be carried out have to spring from an encounter with the Lord. These activities will be a response to the analysis of the context, to the discernment of the signs of the times, and therefore to the human and spiritual needs of the people.

## **1.11 Overview of the following chapters**

In order to present a clearer idea of the overall direction that the research takes, the structure of the chapters that follow is outlined.

In Chapter Two, I engage with the question: What is mission spirituality and how can it best be investigated? In doing this I explore mission and spirituality in the approaches and definitions of other scholars and then I endeavour to offer working definitions of mission and spirituality. It is clear that it is difficult to define the concepts too precisely. I have to allow for a margin of approximation as both mission and spirituality are complex realities with many facets. It is well-known that there is a fund



of definitions both for mission and for spirituality. Yet, in dialogue with other scholars, I elaborate my own working definition of both mission and spirituality.

In Chapter Two, I propose that mission spirituality be investigated through the *mission spirituality spiral*. The spiral is composed of six dimensions: *Spirituality* (encounter with God) at the heart and all along the spiral, *Encounter* (with the others and the context), *Context analysis*, *Theological reflection* (encounter with Scripture and Tradition), *Discernment* for transformative ways of being in mission, and *Reflexivity*. To achieve depth I expand on the significance and the relevance of each dimension.

In Chapter Three I examine the mission spirituality of Daniel Comboni. In order to do this, I first explore the historical and ecclesial background of his era in history, focusing on the mission renaissance of his time. I sketch the life of Comboni in its different phases: the vocation to priesthood and to Africa, the various journeys he undertook both to Africa and Europe. Thereafter I explore his charismatic experience of 1864, the *Plan for the Regeneration of Africa*, The *Postulatum*<sup>21</sup> for the Peoples of Central Africa presented to the Council Fathers at the First Vatican Council, and the foundation of the two Institutes (one for men and one for women) for the mission activity in Africa.

I then explore Comboni's mission spirituality. In the last part of the chapter I shortly reflect on his life and mission spirituality by means of the mission spirituality spiral. I investigate which of its dimensions are part of Comboni's life and spirituality and how he applied them to mission.

The fourth Chapter is dedicated to the history and spirituality of the Comboni Missionary Sisters. Comboni's concept of Catholic women and of the Sisters is explained. I briefly explore the foundation of the congregation by Daniel Comboni in 1872 and its story up to the present time. Through the analysis of official documents of the Congregation I investigate how the dimensions of the *mission spirituality spiral* play a part in the story, the spirituality and the *ministeriality* of the Comboni Missionary Sisters.

Chapter Five is dedicated to the interpretation and embodiment of the mission spirituality of Daniel Comboni by the Comboni Missionary Sisters in the contexts in which they live today. In order to arrive at this understanding, I conducted interviews

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<sup>21</sup> *Postulatum* is a formal request that Comboni made to the Council Fathers gathered in Rome at the First Vatican Ecumenical Council in 1870. In this *Postulatum* Comboni asked the Council Fathers to commit themselves for Africa in finding "worthy Gospel workers or other form of help" for Africa (24.6.1870, in *Writings*:2312).

with 15 Sisters living and ministering in different countries. The results of this research is reported and discussed in this chapter. This chapter includes the proposals for transformative ways of being in mission for the *ministeriality* of the Congregation arising from this research.

In Chapter Six I draw together the initial concepts that I proposed when I began my research. I evaluate whether or not the *mission spirituality spiral* is a relevant instrument for missiological research and its potential for enhancing mission spirituality. In this chapter I use the spiral as a mobilising tool. The identification of a possible way forward for the Comboni Missionary Sisters is the following step.

Chapter Seven is dedicated to the identification of some of the areas related to mission spirituality that merit further research that could enrich missiology and spirituality. Finally, I critically reflect on how this research has contributed to my personal formation and transformation as both a Comboni Missionary Sister and a missiologist, and I engage with my personal way forward.

# Chapter Two

## Developing a framework to discern a relevant mission spirituality

### 2.1 Introduction

The aim of Chapter Two is to propose an approach to mission spirituality that can serve as an adequate framework to explore the interplay between spirituality and mission among members of the Comboni Sisters. At the same time I contend that this approach can serve as a framework for making constructive suggestions for the deepening and renewal of Comboni mission spirituality. In order to do this, I have first to inquire into the nature of both mission and spirituality by taking into consideration and examine the various approaches and definitions made by scholars in both disciplines.

The notion of *missio Dei* has been questioned by some scholars. I intend to consider some of them and also to respond to the challenge of Wickeri (2010:27-43) who suggests the “end of *missio Dei*” as an important biblical component of missiological discourse. I then provide an understanding of mission that informs my own thinking on the subject.

The approach to spirituality will consider that, nowadays, spirituality has crossed the borders of the religious sphere and has found a place in unexpected places in society. I examine them, trying to find an eventual relationship between religious and secular spiritualities. My definition of Christian spirituality is the next step.

After explorations of mission and spirituality I then give a definition of mission spirituality. My proposal is that mission spirituality can be best understood if it is approached by means of a *mission spirituality spiral*, which I have already mentioned.<sup>22</sup> The different dimensions of the spiral will be deepened and explained in this chapter.

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<sup>22</sup> Chapter One (1.2.4): The Research Design.

## 2.2 Approaching mission

Approaches to mission are varied. A myriad of thoughts, considerations, concepts and definitions of mission have filled books throughout history. The term *mission* has experienced a development that has undoubtedly not come to an end. Considerations, reflections, new contributions and paradigm shifts will continue to follow upon one another. Missiological thought developed from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward, first having its focus mainly on conversion (*conversio animarum*), or salvation of souls, and on the implanting of the church (*plantatio ecclesiae*) (Sundermeier 1997:430-431), and thence on accompaniment (Schreiter 2003:199). More recently a multifaceted understanding of mission has developed (Bosch 1991:512). A shift also occurred regarding agency in mission, from an exclusivity of specialists – the missionaries – to an understanding of mission as *missio Dei*, and the context shifted from a Eurocentric focus of *The West to the rest* to *Mission in six continents* (Wild-Wood & Rajkumar 2013:6-7; Schreiter 2001b:153-155). We have passed from modernity to postmodernity and from power to vulnerability and, as Bosch calls it, to “bold humility” (Bosch 1991:489). The concept *missio ad gentes*, as mission directed at the *non-Christian* world, the world outside the Church, is still primary in the Catholic understanding of Church. There are, in fact, still groups and areas that are not evangelised (RM 34; 37). At the same time the concept of *missio inter gentes* (mission among the nations) has now been introduced to overcome the one-way view of mission that was dominant in colonial times. (Burrows 2001:15-20; Chia 2013: 216-218).

From a Catholic perspective, SEDOS (Service of Documentation and Study on Global Mission) after a seminar in 1982 issued a document (Motte & Lang 1982:634-642) reflecting four principal activities of mission that still stand out: proclamation, dialogue, inculturation and liberation of the poor. Three years later the Vatican’s Secretariat for Non-Christians, now called the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, offered a slightly different list of activities: presence and living witness, commitment to social development and struggle against poverty, liturgical life, and prayer, and contemplation, dialogue with followers of other religions, and proclamation and catechesis (DM 13).

The Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM), gathered in Aparecida, Brazil, in May 2007 stated after their deliberations:

Mission is not limited to a program or project, but it is sharing the experience of the event of the encounter with Christ, witnessing to it and announcing it from person to person, from community to community, and from the Church to the ends of the earth (AD 145).

### **2.2.1 Mission *as*...**

In the last part of his monumental work, Bosch (1991:368-510) proposes what he calls *Elements of an Emerging Ecumenical Paradigm*. The thirteen elements are introduced by using the preposition *as*. They are the Church-With-Others; *missio Dei*; mission as mediating salvation; mission as quest for justice; mission as evangelism; mission as contextualization; mission as liberation; mission as inculturation; mission as common witness; mission as ministry by the whole people of God; mission as witness to people of other living faiths; mission as theology; and mission as action in hope. All these elements are, as he rightly says, correlated. When focusing on any one of them the others are also present and visible, and not detached from one another. One could call this a *dimensional* approach to mission, since these 13 elements are seen as different (but complementary) dimensions or aspects of God's one mission. It is an attempt to overcome the temptation of saying *Mission is ...* and thereby reducing mission to one or two of these essential dimensions (Bosch 1991:368).

Like Bosch, some missiologists (e.g. Amaladoss 1994:64-72; Schreiter 2001a:121-143; Langmead 2008:5-20; Bevans & Schroeder 2004:286-394; Karavaltcheva 2013:55-66), in the recent past, have also tried to define mission using the preposition *as*, to explain their understanding of mission. In the next sections, some examples will be explored.

#### **2.2.1.1 Mission *as* prophecy**

For Amaladoss (1994:65), prophecy, comprising a wide spectrum of meanings and used symbolically or metaphorically, is the essence of mission. The task of the prophet is to remind the people that the covenant has not been cancelled but that they have somehow gone astray. Sent by God, the prophet has to call people to leave idols and return to God, by acting justly, not in an abstract way but in a very concrete one by feeding the hungry, liberating the captive, etc. (:66). Bevans (1994:162-163) also uses,

amongst others, the image of the prophet to describe the missionary. In its prophetic function, the announcing of the Good News includes the denunciation of structures and conditions that hinder authentic human existence.

Prophets “imagine the irruption of God’s newness into history. That is why they speak in symbols” (Amaladoss 1994:67). Thus, the prophet is really one who *interprets the signs of the times*.

Bevans and Schroeder (2011:60-61) also highlight the importance of mission *as* prophecy. Mission is not only about promoting human development and personal growth, but also about giving witness in deeds and words. This witness needs to be characterised by humility, respect and discretion. Here we find a clear reminder of Bosch’s option for a “bold humility – or humble boldness” (Bosch 1991:489), which I deem essential for participation in mission today. As a matter of fact, there was a time, when working on the missions was perceived to be an adventure, and, the (Western) missionary was regarded as a hero and placed on a pedestal. Fortunately, this view has, for the most part, changed. Indeed, mission must be carried out in humility, shoulder to shoulder with the people. It is this change in attitude that brings about “the transformation of mission” (Gittins 1993:163).

Indeed, the understanding of mission *as* prophecy cannot be reduced to economic and political liberation. Rather, it may help to shift the “focus from liberation-from to liberation-to” (Amaladoss 1994:69).

### **2.2.1.2 Mission *as* prophetic dialogue**

In what can be considered *the* missiological book after *Transforming mission* (Bosch 1991), Bevans and Schroeder consider four main dimensions of mission, and also make use of the preposition *as* to describe them. They are mission *as* participation in the mission of the Triune God (Bevans & Schroeder 2004: 286-304), mission *as* liberating service to the reign of God (:305-322), mission *as* proclamation of Jesus as universal Saviour (:323-347), and mission *as* prophetic dialogue (348-395). They propose that the final one – mission *as* prophetic dialogue – is a synthesis and deepening of the three previous dimensions.

By defining mission *as* prophetic dialogue, Bevans and Schroeder refer to the Trinitarian foundation of mission. “God’s very *nature* is to be in dialogue: Holy

Mystery (Father), Son (Word) and Spirit in an eternal movement or flow of openness and receiving, a total giving and accepting, spilling over into creation and calling creation back into communion with Godself” (Bevans & Schroeder 2011:26). For them, God’s nature is missionary. Both the inner nature of dialogue and communion and the outer movement of acting in dialogue and communion are the same. Mission, therefore, for the two authors, is participation in the dialogical life and mission of the Triune God.

### **2.2.1.3 Mission as reconciliation**

Schreiter (2001a:121-143; 2013b:232-238) proposes a new model of mission: mission as reconciliation. In a time of great violence and pain, when indelible scars are on people’s memories, reconciliation makes healing possible at different levels: personal, cultural, political, and within the church itself. Reconciliation is, in Schreiter’s view, the primary work of God. God heals and restores the dignity of the victim, making of the victim a new creation. Being healed, the victim him/herself can, then, see the world from a perspective of grace and mercy. From here the wrongdoer may be led to repentance.<sup>23</sup> Reconciliation is not just an act. Rather, it is a spirituality rooted in the crucified Christ and an expectation that all things come together in the risen Christ.

Schreiter proposes that reconciliation and forgiveness are possibly the most powerful vehicles for spreading the Good News in today’s world (2003:191-200).

Langmead (2008:5-20) also sees reconciliation as the central model for mission: “the restorative intent of God’s action in Christ ‘reconciling the world to Godself’ (2 Cor 5:19) is at the heart.” The aim of the gospel is, in his opinion, essentially about reconciliation on every level: with God, with ourselves, and others – not only with all other Christians but also between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous people, with all humankind and creation itself.

One can certainly question whether reconciliation is really the primary work of God and therefore at the heart of God’s mission. Schreiter, referring to the letter of St. Paul to the Romans (5:1-11 – *vertical* dimension), recalls reconciliation as “the central Christian narrative of what God has done for humanity” (2013b:235; 2010b:369). He also refers to the *horizontal* dimension of reconciliation, that is reconciliation between persons or groups and does it with texts from the Pauline teaching (2 Cor 5:17-20) and

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<sup>23</sup> Schreiter (2010b:368-375) elucidates the five principles of a Practical Theology of Reconciliation.

Pauline school (Eph 1:10; 2:12-20; Col 1:20). Reconciliation is certainly a primary work of God. Yet, to experience and live reconciliation, an encounter between God and humanity has first to happen. In this sense, God's primary work is to encounter and establish a relationship with humanity. In Schreiter's words: "The images that guide ... reconciliation are of relationships: relationships with God and with our fellow human beings" (Schreiter 2010b:370).<sup>24</sup>

#### **2.2.1.4 Mission *as* testifying**

Karavaltcheva (2013:55-66) considers mission *as* testifying to the experience of encountering God. She proposes a mission model that can be defined as "faith-experience of shared meeting" (:62). This model is neither liberal nor conservative. It is based not on mass recruiting, but rather on the message of the gospel being addressed to individual people.

#### **2.2.1.5 Mission *as* invitation**

Keum (2010:113) suggests the "concept of 'mission as invitation' as a new foundation for mission in the twenty-first century." Mission is seen as witnessing to the Kingdom of God. This implies a change from being *conquerors* to participating in mission in humility. It is the way of self-emptying and being a servant among the people. Here we find a kenotic understanding of mission referring to Phil 2:7. Mission, then, becomes "a humble invitation to the 'feast in the Kingdom of God' (Lk 14:26)" (Keum 2010:114).

#### **2.2.1.6 Mission *as* liberation and "option for the poor"**

When in 1968 the CELAM Bishops' Conference gathered in Medellín, Colombia, they tried to read the signs of the times in their context. Their primary purpose was the

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<sup>24</sup> Segundo (1993:38-41), analysing the above mentioned Scriptural texts, shows that reconciliation has already been granted to humanity in virtue of the coming and deeds of Jesus Christ. Yet, the definitive reconciliation, including the totality of the Jewish people, is eschatological. Salvation, which is the effect of reconciliation (Rm 5:9-11), is indicated in the future. To experience this already granted reconciliation one has to enter into relationship with God.



transformation of unjust structures. This conference laid the foundation of what would become known as liberation theology, of which Gustavo Gutiérrez became a major exponent. In 1971 he published the work *A Theology of Liberation*. In the same year, the Bishops, from all over the world, were gathered in Rome for a Synod. The result of that Synod was the document *De Iustitia in mundo*. It declares that justice is a constitutive dimension of the proclamation of the gospel (IM 6).

By liberation I mean liberation for the *total* human being<sup>25</sup>. This idea is rooted in the gospel and in the very fact of our being children of God. The eschatological aspect cannot in any way be forgotten. We must bear in mind that human liberation and salvation in Christ are closely linked but never identified (EN 35). I see liberation and salvation in a holistic way that includes the person in all his/her dimensions. In this way we avoid the two extremes: the one of being taken out of the world, taking refuge in (unhealthy) *spiritualism* (cf. EG 262: "...we must reject the temptation to offer a privatised and individualistic spirituality which ill accords with the demands of charity, to say nothing of the implications of the incarnation"), and, the other one, that reduces salvation to mere economic justice or human liberation from unjust structures of sin.

As a consequence of these developments, new ideas began to shape mission. The preferential option for the poor became the main theme in Latin America. In Asia, Catholics focused on interreligious dialogue, whilst in Africa they tried to explore the interconnectedness of culture, gospel and church. In the Northern hemisphere, the emphasis was placed on the dialogue between Christianity and secularised Europe and North America. Meanwhile in the Pacific Islands, Catholics explored the role of Christian faith in the occurring social-political changes (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:251-252).

We must be careful, however, that when talking of an option for the poor we do not place the emphasis on the preposition *for*, lest it becomes an option that *does something for* the poor. Should this happen, the consequence would be paternalism. Such an option would bring no improvement but further oppression and dependence (Boff & Pixley 1987:238). The option for the poor achieves its real meaning when the doing something *for* the poor changes into a doing *with* the poor, and eventually becomes a doing *by* the poor themselves (Bedford-Strohm 1993:198; cf. Gittins

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<sup>25</sup> Groody (2007:185-186) identifies three levels of liberation: the social level, that aims to transform "our relationships with others and the structures in society that negatively affect these relationships;" the personal, that addresses those "internal structures that affect our relationship with ourselves and consequently with others;" and the religious level, that "deals with our relationship with God."

1993:162). It has always to be kept in mind that the poor are persons with the same dignity as other persons. This means that they must be encountered as equals (*auf Augenhöhe*). The relationship, therefore, cannot be one-way. Rather, it becomes *give-and-receive*.

For Comboni (To Msgr. Luigi Ciurcia 15.2.1870, in *Writings*:2181), the founder of the Comboni Missionary Sisters, mission was to be addressed to the poorest and most abandoned who, according to him, were the peoples of Africa.<sup>26</sup> I will explore Comboni's concept of mission in Chapter Three.

The Comboni Missionary Sisters, in their Rule of Life, mention "mission as liberation" (RoL 55) and "mission as incarnation" (RoL 56). To them the goal of mission is the coming of the kingdom. In order to realise this goal, the Church and the Sisters are involved in the work of liberation of humanity from sin and social evils, which oppresses it (RoL 55). The Sisters, sharing in the life and situations of the people among whom they live, contribute to the integral development of the oppressed (RoL 55.1).

Mission as incarnation finds its justification in Christ's Incarnation. As the Lord became incarnate to bring salvation to all, he entered fully into the situation and the culture of the Judaic world. In the same way the Sisters are called to enter into the environment and the culture in which they live and to announce the Gospel in a way that it "may be received and assimilated by the culture of the people, and so transforming from within every human situation" (RoL 56; cf. AG 22 and EN 20).

### **2.2.1.7 Mission as care for the earth**

Mission as care for the earth is another emerging theme. According to Schreiter (2013a:189), "the effects of climate change on the world and what this means within the context of *missio Dei*" still need to be deepened and figured out "in its biblical foundations and theological elaborations." In this connection, Wright (2010:235) states that "a biblical theology of mission that flows from the mission of God himself [sic] must include the ecological sphere within its scope, and see practical environmental action...as a legitimate part of Christian mission." As a matter of fact, the biblical claim that "the earth is the Lord's" (Ps 24:1); that everything under heaven belongs to God

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<sup>26</sup> Other references can be found in *Writings* under the following numbers: 1655, 4115, 5227, 2303, 2561, 2591, 2799, 3483 etc.

(Job 41:11); and that Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth (Mt 28:18) is a call to “care for the earth as an act of love and obedience to its creator and redeemer” (Wright 2010:239).

Drawing on the teaching of Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis, Edwards (2013:215) shows that “ecology [is] at the heart of Christian mission because the natural world is intrinsic to the deepest mysteries of faith.”

Moreover, “Christian mission has an ecological character because it proclaims a God who gives God’s self to us, first in creation and then in the Word made flesh, who, in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus, promised to transform all things, all the creatures of Earth and of the universe, in Christ” (2013:215).

Aránzazu Aguado (2010:175-180) recalls the contributions of the WCC, in this regard, in the past few years. It considers the integrity of creation to be part of mission, as a “call to bring the whole creation to God” (:178).

According to Kerber (2010:228), care of the Earth that is grounded in creation spirituality has to be considered “an essential component of the mission of the church within the cosmic dimensions of peace and justice.” Kirk (2000:167) insists that ecological concern is integral to mission, as it is “clearly related to matters of economic and political injustice.”

Pope Francis, in his Encyclical *Laudato Si’* (2015), addresses the document to all people; not only to the Church. Whilst he does not speak about mission, he addresses the ecological issues that challenge humanity and the church. For him, “a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (LS 49). In this way he links, as do many other theologians, the dimensions of ecology and social justice. In a further step, Francis links interreligious dialogue with protection of both creation and the poor (LS 201). He emphasises the fact that everything is interconnected (LS 70; 240) and therefore, care for the earth can be seen as a dimension of the mission entrusted by God to humanity.

Indeed the earth belongs to God (Ps 24:1). Therefore it must be respected and protected. Humanity must also take into consideration the fact that the earth actually does not need it in order to exist, whilst humanity does need the earth for its survival. If humanity were to be extinguished, the earth would continue its evolution. This fact should at least be borne in mind, and thus anthropocentrism should be questioned, when

discussing humanity's relationship with creation.<sup>27</sup> In his regard, also Pope Francis, in his Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si'* states: "Clearly, the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures" (LS 68).

### 2.2.1.8 Mission as *missio inter gentes*

In recent years a new paradigm has emerged, namely mission as *missio inter gentes*. The term *missio inter gentes* was first introduced by William R. Burrows (2001:15-20), in his response to Amaladoss. Although Amaladoss did not use the term, Burrows perceived a move towards *missio inter gentes* (mission among nations), that is, mission among followers of different religious traditions, who are to be considered as neighbours and friends.

Tan (2004:65-93) suggests that the missiological approach of the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences can best be described as *missio inter gentes*, as it considers the diverse and pluralistic *Sitz im Leben* and religious pluralism of the Asian continent, as well as their dialogical approach to this plurality.

Phan (2011:131-140) understands *missio inter gentes* in the context of the plurality of Asian cultures, not only as bridge-building between the two sides of the three divides,<sup>28</sup> but he also understands the preposition *inter*, as meaning *among* or *in the midst of*. In this way, *Missio inter Gentes* means a "reciprocal mission between the missionaries and the *gentes Asiae* ... mission is ... a two-way activity done by the *gentes* to the missionaries and by the missionaries to the *gentes*." It is therefore a "mutual mission" (Phan 2011:134-135).

Phan (2011:136-137) takes a further step, indicating that, as mission in Asia is done *together*, mission becomes *mission cum gentibus*. Both missionaries and *gentes* are committed to a common cause and work together.

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<sup>27</sup> For a further in depth study about care for the Earth, ecology and eco-spirituality that can be connected to mission cf. the work of Boff (1997) *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*.

<sup>28</sup> These are: the *migrational* divide (nationals against migrants), the *industrial* divide that separates rural from urban communities, and the *informational* divide that sees illiterate people on one side and the educated on the other side.

### 2.2.1.9 Mission as *missio Dei*

The term *mission* has, as stated above, experienced various paradigm shifts over the years, but it is not the intention of this research to examine them all. As far as the Catholic Church is concerned, an important turning point occurred with the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Its Decree, *Ad Gentes*, which deals with the mission activity of the church, refers back to the ecclesiology of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, which names the church as “a universal sacrament of salvation” (LG 48). The Church, then, is sent to all peoples to announce the Gospel.

*Ad Gentes* 2 develops a Trinitarian insight into the concept of mission: “The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father.” Thus, mission is primarily a work of the triune God.

It was God who entered the world through the (first) act of creation and since then has been active in human history through God’s Spirit. God has always been speaking to human beings through prophets (Heb 1:1) sending them to God’s people (Amaladoss 2001:31).

*Ad Gentes* 2 pictures God the Father as the life-giving fountain of life, who, in total freedom, creates the world and calls humanity to share in God’s fullness (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:287). God, then, fulfils this through the sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit, who reveal most fully to us who God is, as also, the mission that flows from God’s very nature. It is the Holy Spirit who works for the continuous sanctification of all creation. This notion of mission finds parallels with the concept of *missio Dei* developed in Protestant circles in the 1950s (Richenbächer 2003:588-594; Sundermeier 2003:560-561). The origin of the notion of *missio Dei* goes back to Karl Barth’s address to the Brandenburg Mission Conference in 1932.<sup>29</sup> On that occasion, Barth invited the missionary to consider that mission in the early church was “a notion of the teaching about the Trinity, that is, the description of the divine self-sending, the sending of the Son, and the Holy Spirit into the world” (Barth 1957:115, my translation). The term *missio Dei* was coined by Hartenstein in 1934 and elaborated upon at the Willingen Conference of the International Missionary Council in 1952, although that very expression was not used at the Conference (Richenbächer 2003:589).

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<sup>29</sup> For a detailed investigation about who first related the doctrine of Trinity to mission activity, cf. Flett 2010:11.

Vicedom, in his book *Missio Dei: Einführung in eine Theologie der Mission* (1960), describes the concept and its components more precisely.<sup>30</sup>

Initially, the Trinitarian theology of *Ad Gentes* did not have a strong impact on the Catholic missiological community, in a large part because of its ecclesiocentric theological stance. Meanwhile, in some Protestant circles a more secularised notion of *missio Dei* developed, in particular by the Dutch theologian Johannes Hoekendijk (Bevans & Schroeder 2004: 291). For him, “the church has a little more than a character of an ‘intermezzo’ between God and the world” (Bosch 1991:384; 392). Nevertheless, since the 1980s there has been a renewal in Trinitarian theology. Catholics generally trace a renewal in Trinitarian theology back to the essay on Trinity by Karl Rahner in 1976 (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:290-291). Several Catholic scholars focused on the connection between Trinitarian theology and mission. Among them is Catherine Mowry LaCugna, who advocated that the participation in the saving action of God is the church’s task. She states:

The mission, the ‘being sent forth’ of every Christian, is the same as the mission of Christ and the Spirit to do the will and work of God, to proclaim the good news of salvation, to bring peace and concord, to justify hope in the final return of all things to God (LaCugna 1991:401-402).

Both Schreiter (2001a:155) and Bevans & Schroeder (2004:293) emphasise the rootedness of mission in God’s work and the Church’s identification with that work as constitutive of its identity. They also discuss the Trinitarian character of mission – the *Missio Dei* – and its relevance for a new understanding of mission in this century.

In line with the Trinitarian foundation for the concept of mission, I maintain, together with many other missiologists, that *missio Dei* is not primarily an activity of the Church but God’s attribute. There is only one mission, and that is God’s mission. Jesus is sent by the Father to carry out the mission of the Father. It also becomes clear that the Church does not have a mission, but rather participates in God’s mission: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you ... Receive the Holy Spirit” (Jn 20:21-22).

To share in God’s mission, means to participate in God’s mission of love for humanity and for the entire creation. The church, called to participate in God’s mission, has the privilege to share this love. Moreover, as humanity is made in the image of the

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<sup>30</sup> He gives reasons for its foundations, explores the rule of God, the sending, the aim of mission and the community. For a detailed history of the term *missio Dei*, cf. Richenbacher 2003:588-605.

Triune God (cf. Gen 1:27) it means that it is an integral part of the *missio Dei*, not just an accident (Price & Richards 2013:28).

The church and its expansion is not the aim or the goal of mission. Rather, the existence of the church is due to the existence of mission and not vice versa (Ahonen 2000:43; Bevans 2010:201-207).

### **2.2.2 Has *missio Dei* come to an end?**

Considering the history of the concept of *missio Dei* and its various interpretations, amendments, misunderstandings, and weaknesses, some theologians question its legitimacy. Some try to expand upon it with more specifications (Sundermeier 2003: 560-578) or add a term to the concept. Richenbacher (2003:596-599), for example, proposes the addition of the word *Triunius*. He justifies his option, by pointing out that Western European Christians live in a multi-faith and multi-ethnic society. Therefore, in his opinion, when speaking of *missio Dei*, it should be emphasised that it is the Triune God that is meant. Richenbacher (2003:596) asserts that by talking about the mission of the Triune God, Christians talk “about something that they themselves cannot bring to the people of other faiths, because he [sic], as their creator and sustainer, is already at work in them.” Indeed, God is at work in all people, therefore Christians have to cultivate an attentiveness that enables them to recognise where and how God is operating in people. Moreover, Christians, by the way they live – or should live – are already witnessing to their faith, not only in Christ, but also in the Trinitarian God. This witness of life will

stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one (EN 21).

By this kind of witness, Christians, indeed, *bring* something to others, whether they are Christians, or lapsed, or whether they belong to other faiths. This does not mean that they jeopardise the dialogue with other faiths or their dignity. Witness of life, in fact, bears in itself openness to and respect for the other. It allows and enhances dialogue.

By adding the word *Triunius* to the term *Missio Dei*, Richenbächer does not intend to discard the latter concept. He intends to maintain it and at the same time, he wants to formulate it more specifically “for the sake of the invitation to believe and the dignity of all religions” (2003:599).

The concept of *missio Dei* has, according to Flett (2010:76), a “critical necessity, flawed Trinitarian basis, complex range and lack of cohesion.” He maintains that the main contemporary problems regarding *missio Dei* are due to the fact that “[d]espite its Trinitarian language *missio Dei* never escapes an anthropological grounding for mission” (Flett 2010:77). He points out that the problems arise from inattention to God’s being. He explains that abstraction occurred when the attention shifted from *God’s* being as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to mere *being*. Sending became a universal category with the particular sending of Jesus as one event within God’s general activity. Referring to Barth, Flett (2010:201) insists that a Trinitarian theology of mission must find its starting point with the identity of God’s being as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Guder (2015:26) points out that some reject the *missio Dei* consensus because of its central conviction; the uniqueness of Jesus as Lord and Saviour. The debate seems to focus on the conviction that God’s self-revelation in the history of Israel and in Jesus is definitive for all creation, and humanity depends on God’s grace for salvation. A way of resolving this debate might be found in Kalliath’s suggestion (2007:81) of picturing “Jesus’ uniqueness in his ‘ubiquitousness’ rather than his universality as traditionally conceived ... ‘Ubiquitousness’ implies spatialization of Christology rather than spiritualization or temporalization and invites local time-bound epiphanies.” In this way Christ’s mystery can be seen and experienced, rather than heard and thought. The universal is thus supported by the local: “the universality of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is to be sought in a relational epistemology of the presence of Jesus’ mystery in various religious pursuits” (Kalliath 2007:83-84).

Although Sebastian (2007:33-34) admits that the concept of *misso Dei* allowed space for numerous theological reflections and informed missiological praxis, he also deems it time for “a shift of the point of view ... in order to interrogate this concept and respond from a perspective which has been impacted by this concept, but has not been given sufficient opportunity to inform it.” Sebastian (2007:42) is thus proposing a “mission to God.” This kind of approach “holds both promise and frustration.” It holds promise because responsibility for action can now be taken; and frustration, because the motivation for such endeavour may be misunderstood.



The possessive pronoun *our* linked to the word mission looks for space, “reach[es] out in order to seek partnerships across ancient enmities, explore[s] traditions and experiences from the past, valorise[s] and interrogate[s] the complexities of the present, and foster[s] any inquiry that seeks to understand rather than explain, in a spirit of honest listening and learning” (Sebastian 2007:43). Mission to God leads to articulating and contemplating who God is. This occurs because, according to Sebastian (2007:44), we – whoever this *we* may be – are forced to look within ourselves and consequently be able to express the hope that is in us, a hope that urges us “to mission to God through our mission to our neighbour, whoever this neighbour may be, and whatever ‘mission’ this neighbour may have to us.”

These are a few examples of the debate about the validity or legitimacy of *missio Dei* for mission. Another scholar, Wickeri (2010:27-43), proposes “that the idea of *missio Dei* whether as critique, inspiration, or organizing principle for a theology of mission has run its course.” Below, I intend to respond to some of the critiques he makes about the concept.

Wickeri (2010:27-28) considers *missio Dei* to be an all-embracing concept that has dominated the missiological scene for three quarters of a century, thus precluding other approaches to mission. However, he does not indicate which other approaches could have been proposed besides *missio Dei*.

The concept of *missio Dei* is, in his opinion, just an elite understanding that is far from, or that it ignores popular religiosity (Wickeri 2010:36). If *missio Dei* is rooted in the Trinity, then, Rahner could agree with Wickeri. For Rahner, in fact, in practical life most Christians can be considered *monotheist* “should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged” (in LaCugna 1991:213).

On the other hand, the Orthodox Church takes an interesting position. For her “the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is not a piece of ‘high theology’ reserved for the professional scholar, but something that has a living, *practical* importance for every Christian” (Ware 1963:216). Human beings are made in the image of God, and God, for Christians, is the Trinity. It is only in the light of the Trinity that a person understands who he/she is and also what God wants him/her to be. This kind of approach to the Trinity can also help other churches make *missio Dei* an accessible and down-to-earth

concept. For LaCugna (1991:1), the doctrine of the Trinity is of practical relevance<sup>31</sup>, as it bears in itself “radical consequences for Christian life.” This derives from “the essential unity of *theologia* and *oikonomia*” and consists of “the shared life between God and creature” (:377-378).

Wickeri (2010:39) insists that the concept of *missio Dei* overemphasises God at the expense of believers’ doing. There have actually been radicalisations in this sense. Yet, it is a matter of fact that God has been on mission since the beginning of creation and has always called humanity and involved it in mission. The participation of humanity in mission is, therefore, essential, not secondary. Just as the church is missionary by nature, so too, each believer is necessarily missionary.

Certainly, looking at the many different interpretations of the term and the problems emerging from them, new paths may be taken. Nevertheless, as Guder (2015:28) rightly highlights, *missio Dei* has an anti-ideological thrust. It “refuses to prioritise any particular cultural narrative, either positively or negatively ... God’s mission defines the purpose, the process, and the character of Christian witness in the world.” This is one of the reasons why he, and I, would not give up the term.

### **2.2.3 Mission: Working definition**

At this point it is appropriate to highlight that the dimensions of mission (the ones discussed in depth and those only mentioned) all bear in themselves the moment of encounter with God, although, at times, it is not explicitly mentioned. Healing from God leads to reconciliation. Invitation and testimony assume an encounter with God. Those liberated by God can choose the way of committing themselves to the liberation of others, with particular attention to the poor and marginalised. The experience of encounter with God, and of being part of the creation will lead to concern for its care. The encounter with the Other (the Triune God, for Christians) will also give rise to a reciprocal and dialogical encounter with others and with the followers of different religious traditions.

Thus, it seems clear that there is a convergence between encounter (and relationship) with God and with others.

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<sup>31</sup> In this line of thinking, Sheldrake states that “to affirm God as Trinity touches every aspect of Christian belief, attitudes and living” (Sheldrake 1998:77).

It is important to mention here the way Kritzinger (2008:788) defines missiology. He writes that "... a missiology may emerge that will be encounterology. A critical and creative reflection on the encounters between the people of the Way and the people of other ways." Or in other similar words: "Missiology – which critically reflects on mission – is ‘encounterology’, the scholarly study of such transformative encounters” (2011:52). Kritzinger, here, refers to an encounter of Christians with believers of other religions. Mission, unfolds through a series of encounters that have to be critically investigated and reflected upon. This idea will be developed later in this chapter.

Having explored some of the various facets of mission and maintaining the validity of *missio Dei*, I now intend to elucidate what I consider to be the core of mission. To do this, I have to go back to *missio Dei*. God is the only one who *saves* and God does so by manifesting Godself “to our first parents from the very beginning” (DV 3), by *encountering* and entering into relationship with humanity. God wants to be encountered and wants to establish a relationship with humankind. God’s mission is primarily that God and humanity can meet (cf. Sheldrake 2010:95-96). This encounter with God is a liberating and transformative one. The accounts of encounters between people and God in the Old Testament (for example Moses at the burning bush – Ex 3), and Jesus and the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, result in a liberation and transformation of the person encountered. Through the encounter with Jesus, the disciples, the healed persons, Mary Magdalene, the Samaritan woman, Paul, and others experienced a personal liberation from sin, from fear, from anything that prevented them from being totally free within. This liberation brings about transformation in the person to the point that he/she undergoes a *metanoia* (*metanoi,a*), a conversion in his/her life. When genuine conversion occurs, there is a greater chance that the person becomes more open to others and to their needs. Personal conversion and transformation creates awareness of the need for transformation in the society and in the world. Consequently, the person shows a readiness to witness to what he/she has received from God and to commit to working for the good of others and society (Karecki 2010:2-3).

Sundermeier (2003:563) stresses that Jesus describes his relationship with his disciples – and with all who open themselves to His love – as a friendship: “You are my friends” (Jn 15:14). Friendship is a term that indicates “the exclusive relationship between God and Moses in the Old Testament.” By calling his disciples friends, Jesus

makes the kind of relationship that there was between God and Moses applicable, as it were, to all human beings. In this way, the mission in which Christians are called to participate, is for Sundermeier “to spread God’s friendship” (Sundermeier 2003:564). In the light of the above discussion Sundermeier’s interpretation is appropriate.

However, it can be taken further. Indeed, that is exactly what John does in his gospel. Here, Jesus presents himself as the Good Shepherd. He knows his sheep and they know him. This kind of knowing “is not primarily intellectual or informational” (Schneiders 1999:53). It is like a knowing in a deep friendship, where “a deep sharing of life with Jesus” occurs and becomes “participation in the life of God” (:53). Moloney (1996:137) speaks of a “spiraling play on the use of the *ginōskein* [*ginw,skein*: *to know*].” The expression “I know my own” (Jn 10:14) shows this kind of deep knowledge and relationship, a reciprocity of loving familiarity, which finds its source in the mutuality between the Father and Son. Therefore, as Kelly and Moloney (2003:218) put it, “the bond between Jesus and his disciples derives from the primordial communion existing between the Father and his only Son.” It is to this kind of mutual knowing, and reciprocity that the Triune God aims. This is God’s primary mission.

Sundermeier states that “God is the very *origo et fons* of mission, the origin and constant source of its power” (2003:572). If mission does not live from this source and does not draw vision and strength from it, it is neither authentic nor credible. I agree with him but would go further and dare to claim that, participating in the *missio Dei* means, first of all, to live this deep relationship with the Triune God and, then, to find ways to *facilitate* the encounter of the person with God. Encounter and relationship with the Triune God are what will transform the person and will move her or him to make a commitment to participate in God’s mission. All the other above-mentioned dimensions of mission (witness, proclamation, prophecy, liberation, inculturation, reconciliation, justice, peace, care of creation, etc.) will necessarily flow from this mutual knowing, and reciprocal relationship, so that others “may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). Moreover, all these dimensions are possible *loci* of encounter with God.

## **2.3 Approaching spirituality**

Just as it is not easy to explore mission, in its fullness, the same is true of spirituality. A myriad of definitions has been formulated, and paradigm shifts have

occurred. When one considers the phenomenon of spirituality from intra- and interdisciplinary viewpoints, one gets an idea of just how complicated and complex this phenomenon is (Waaijman 2002:423).

### 2.3.1 Spirituality in history

The word *spirituality* finds its origin in the Latin *spiritualitas*, associated with *spiritualis*. Its Latin root means *to breathe*, therefore, has to do with life. In 1 Cor 2:13, Paul states: “we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.” In this sense, for Paul, a person is spiritual when he/she is open to the Spirit; it means living a *life in the Spirit*. In turn, this Latin word corresponds to the Greek *pneuma* and the adjective *pneumatikos*. It is not the opposite of *physical* or *material* (in Greek *soma*) but of *flesh* (in Greek *sarx*) in the sense of everything contrary to the Spirit of God. It is therefore about two different attitudes, and not about the contrast between soul and body (Sheldrake 2010:6; Wiseman 2006:2-3; Principe 1983:130; Gutiérrez 1984:56-57, 59, 62).

Waaijman (2002:315), in his monumental work on spirituality, argues that besides the word *spirituality*, there are other basic words from various times and cultures, that are used “to explain its original understanding of the field in question.” He identifies and explores them in the Scripture (:316-332), in the Hellenistic world (:333-351), and in the modern world (:352-366). The phenomenon of spirituality “cannot be exclusively constructed by way of the etymology of *spiritus* < *pneuma* < *ruach*” (2002:860); several approaches are needed to get a more precise picture of the phenomenon.

Interdisciplinary perspectives, such as theology, philosophy, science(s) of religions, psychology, etc. must be included in the research about spirituality. Regrettably, Waaijman does not include missiology among these disciplines.

Until the twelfth century “[t]heology was articulated spirituality and spirituality was lived theology. Scripture was the source and norm of all knowledge” (Schneiders 2005:2). In time, when seats of learning shifted from the monasteries to the universities, and the fact that the theological method became scientific – a process of intellectual speculation – the path towards an inexorable separation from the spiritual was opened up (Sheldrake 1998:40). This separation between theology and spirituality increased during the Enlightenment, as scientific enquiry was employed as a way to truth and

certainty. Spirituality, therefore disappeared from theological circles and it was only in the twentieth century that it re-emerged in Catholic theology. Nevertheless, there were some limitations. The starting point for “spiritual theology” was the principles governing dogmatic theology (:53). It employed a deductive method, which had a prescriptive character and its concern was mostly directed to the practice of personal prayer. In the first half of the twentieth century, the word *spirituality* was considered to be an umbrella concept for asceticism and mysticism as various publications show (Waaijman 2002:363).

It was only after the Second Vatican Council, and in more recent times, that Western theology experienced a shift towards a serious reflection on the experience of God in its particular and plural cultures. *Spiritual theology* became a more dynamic and inclusive concept known as spirituality (:55).

The growing interest in studying Christian religious experience, both from the past, and as it was now developing, gave birth to the contemporary discipline of spirituality with publications and journals disseminating their research. Three approaches to the study of spirituality became recognised: the historical, the theological and the anthropological or hermeneutical approach (Schneiders 2005:4-5).

### **2.3.2 Spirituality today**

Nowadays, spirituality has become a holistic phenomenon that is not just relegated to the person’s inner life. The body has become important and plays a relevant part in spirituality. Practices like reiki, massage, sacred dance, natural healing, and yoga are increasingly popular in the sphere of spirituality. Spirituality is “no longer considered as an individual endeavour; it is performed in social settings” (Waaijman 2013:14), in prayer groups, group meditation, and group discernment. Although it is a journey of personal conversion, it is also and foremost a journey of an entire people (Gutiérrez 1984:72, 89).

Spirituality seems to have opened its inner core to a much wider space, for nowadays, its focus is set on the mystical, rather than just on dogmatic frameworks or ascetic practices. Through the influence of Eastern spiritualities mysticism becomes unbounded, and at the same time moves away from dualistic thinking (Waaijman 2013:14-15).

A growing number of people, although belonging to a single religious institution, live “within two or more overlapping spheres of spiritual influence” (Hick 2005:6). Some people make use of a mixture of spiritual elements from other spiritual traditions, and at times, from other religions. For this reason, some scholars in the West suggest that nowadays religion is being *replaced* by *spirituality* that seems to speak more directly to the needs of this era (Sheldrake 2011:30).

Today, spirituality is no longer something for specialists (priests, religious Sisters and the like). Rather, it has moved beyond the “limited horizons of monasteries and traditional practices ... [It] is no longer confined to religious institutions” (Waaijman 2013:14). A good portion of modern society shows interest in spirituality, regardless of the possible meaning they may attribute to it.

In his work *The Spirituality Revolution*, Tacey (2004:1) defines this revolution as “a spontaneous movement in society, a new interest in the reality of spirit and its healing effects on life, health, community and well-being.” This “revolution” is, according to him, a response to the loss of meaning in society and emerges as a countercultural revolution against increasing materialism. I consider this view realistic. In Tacey’s view the collapse of idols and false gods has caused a loss of meaning, and liberation ideologies have not brought freedom. These have rather given rise to, for instance, totalitarian fascism, repression, mass murder, or tyranny. Moreover, unrestrained liberalism has produced exceedingly high “levels of consumerism, social exploitation, pollution and the desecration of the environment” (Tacey 2004:19). Disillusioned, and maybe frustrated, people – young people in particular – seek answers in one or other spirituality.

Another contributing factor to the expansion of the customary notion of spirituality might be, according to Waaijman, “that ‘spirituality’ is an unencumbered word.” It refers to “something undefined, like ‘religiosity’, ‘the experience of faith’ and ‘religious experience’” (2002:364). This fact favours the opening of an area where institutional frameworks are not yet present. In this way, *spirituality* can assume the role of a *new* way of life, for movements of emancipation, such as liberation spirituality, feminist spirituality, environmental spirituality, etc. For this reason, even motivations that are not included in the articulation of established institutions of faith may gain ground (Waaijman 2002:363-364).

### **2.3.3 Spirituality or spiritualities?**

When considering the word spirituality, the question arising, is whether it is appropriate to speak of spirituality or of spiritualities.

In looking at the series *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest* (Cousins: 1985-), one comes across an overwhelming variety of spiritualities. While some of them are by now extinct, others are developing inside and outside established religions. Because there is not a single feature of spirituality common to all spiritualities, it becomes difficult to categorise spirituality (Hense 2011:10-11). In this sense, a *generic* spirituality does not exist. Rather, there are individuals and communities with their own spiritual intuitions. For this reason, it is necessary to study spiritualities separately, form by form (Hense 2014:6-11). In fact, there are many kinds of spiritualities: indigenous, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, feminist, liberation spirituality, and many more.

In Christianity also there have been, and will be, many variations in interpreting and living faith and the gospel. Scholars have labelled schools and traditions of spirituality, such as: Pauline, Johannine, Orthodox, Jesuit, Franciscan, Dominican, etc. Each of these spiritualities tries to live out the Gospel, emphasising some aspects and giving less relevance to others (Principe 1983:136-137). Moreover, spiritualities can be divided into active and contemplative, apophatic (ineffable, absence of images, silence, darkness) and kataphatic (with images, symbols), apostolic and monastic ones, etc. (Schneiders 2005:5; Sheldrake 1998:25).

The more one looks at the phenomenon of spirituality, the more it becomes difficult to give a precise definition. What is evident is that a large number of spiritualities has developed and grown and will continue to grow.

### **2.3.4 Religious spirituality versus (or and) secular spirituality?**

The preceding discussion of spirituality leads to an understanding that there are many spiritualities. Secular spiritualities also find a place in this broad spectrum. Here is not the place here to explore the meaning of secular spirituality. It suffices to point out that the separation of religious from secular spiritualities consists in the fact that secular



spirituality “is conceived in phenomenological rather than in metaphysical or institutional terms” (Van Ness 1996:1-2). For Van Ness (1996:7) secular spirituality “attempts to locate optimal human experiences within a nonreligious context of existential and cosmic meaning.” In his view, it is not necessary that “everything spiritual must be religious; there are ways of understanding the world as a cosmic whole and the self as an enduring agent that are not directly indebted to religion” (:7).

Secular spiritualities are not tied to religions. However, they can have moments of sacralisation. Their leaders, in fact, may use religious symbols, myths or rituals, without referring to a religious doctrine (Jespers 2014:210-211). Jespers employs the term “*religiosity* (or religiousness) as a general concept, which implies that (a very weak kind of) religiosity can feature in a completely secular context” (:213).

The question now arises, as to whether religious and secular spiritualities need to be seen as opposed to each other, or could be considered as complementary. Although they differ in their sources, motivations and, at times, values or aims, they are not total opposites.

Secular spiritualities can exert a certain influence on religious traditions. This happens in two ways: when a religious tradition assumes powerful and greatly celebrated aspects of a secular culture, or when secular commitment in “protest and resistance to established institutions and customs” can be compared with “the radical nature of some religious visions” (Van Ness 1996:14).

Secular spiritualities constitute a challenge to followers of traditional religions. By responding to these challenges they come to realise the importance of their own tradition, community, ritual, and morality. Thus, the opportunity provided by this challenge results in the revitalisation of their religious spiritual tradition (:15).

Moreover, an integrated and holistic Christian spirituality avoids dualism and does not separate the material from the spiritual, the sacred from the secular. It involves the whole of life and of the human being (Kretzschmar 2000:40).

In this way, it is possible to consider secular and religious spiritualities as complementary, and therefore, to speak of religious *and* secular spiritualities.

### 2.3.5 How is Christian spirituality defined?

As already mentioned above, a large number of definitions of spirituality and of Christian spirituality have been attempted. I intend to consider some of them in order to formulate my own definition of spirituality, bearing in mind that it cannot be too precise and definitive.

Schneiders (2005:1) defines spirituality as “conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.” This is a broad definition that, in her opinion, can be applied to Christian, non-Christian religious spiritualities, and to secular spiritualities. For example, this definition is valid also for Daoist or Buddhist spiritualities as these spiritualities do have what Schneiders calls ultimate value, although it is not understood in terms of a personal God. This definition assumes, for her, the contours of Christian spirituality when the “ultimate value is the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ and communicated through His Holy Spirit, and the project of self-transcendence is the living of the paschal mystery within the context of the church community” (:1).

I agree with her in considering spirituality to be a lived and ongoing experience. Spirituality is not limited to a period or solely to particular moments. Rather, it embraces the whole life and the person holistically. However, I deem the definition to be too broad. On the one hand, it is true that it can include other spiritualities but, on the other hand, I think Christian spirituality needs to be defined and now I turn to the work of still other authors.

Authors such as Teasdale (1999:17) consider spirituality to be a journey on which one embarks alone; it is a personal journey. For Teasdale spirituality is “a way of life that affects and includes every moment of existence. It is at once a contemplative attitude, a disposition to a life of depth, and the search for ultimate meaning, direction, and belonging.” It is an ongoing process that leads into the depths of one’s being, where one is present to one’s self, to one’s weaknesses and to the ultimate mystery.

In the introduction to his work *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, Waaijman (2002:1) writes: “Spirituality as we have defined it touches the core of our human existence: our relationship to the Absolute.” I consider this definition to be appropriate. The core of spirituality is the encounter and the relationship with the Triune

God through the Sacraments, and the Eucharist in particular;<sup>32</sup> through Scripture; through prayer and contemplation; and consequently, in everyday life, especially among those at the margins of society.

In recent times, some authors have used the term *transformation* in getting to the heart of spirituality. Among them, Coleman (1997:11) states that spirituality “comes to be seen as the key to transformation.” For Schneiders (1998:42) spirituality “studies the transformative Christian experience as such.” McGinn (1998:14), referring to mysticism, speaks of “some form of ‘immediate’ consciousness of God aimed to [sic] self-transformation.” A few years later he took a step forward and emphasised the general “[r]ecognition of the power of mysticism to transform not only the individual but also social and institutional structures” (McGinn 2005:14).

Spirituality, for Sheldrake, is not so much concentrated on defining *perfection* abstractly, and is certainly not limited to interiority. Rather, it seeks to integrate all aspects of human experience. Sheldrake borrows the words of Rowan Williams (in Sheldrake 1998:58) and emphasises that spirituality is not a private experience. Rather, “it must now touch every area of human experience, the public and social. The painful, negative even pathological byways of the mind, the moral and relational world.”

Spirituality is considered by Hense (2014:1) “as a vague and indistinct category.” She therefore attempts a definition by differentiating between two alternative ways of living, namely, the one of religious believers and the one of secular believers. The former are convinced that what brings fulfilment lies beyond us in external sources. The latter are convinced that these sources lie within us or within this world (Hense 2014:4).

Although it seems to be more appropriate to speak of Christian spiritualities rather than Christian spirituality – as already indicated above, there are various Christian spiritualities. Cunningham and Egan (1996:7) attempt a definition:

Christian spirituality is the lived encounter with Jesus Christ in the Spirit ...  
Christian spirituality is concerned not so much with the doctrines of Christianity as with the ways those teachings shape us as individuals who are part of the Christian community who live in the larger world.

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<sup>32</sup> Koenig (2000:xii), in his study, refers to the early celebration of the Eucharist as *Eucharistic meals*. He investigates how these Eucharistic meals or liturgies “served to define and fuel the outreach ministry of Jesus’ disciples.” He explains that depending on how much these Eucharistic meals were centred in the experience of God, of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and in thanksgiving “they generate[d] tremendous power for the proclamation of the gospel both within and beyond the confines of the worshipping community” (:123).

The authors trace the contours of Christian spirituality as follows: spirituality presupposes a *way of life* and *discipleship*. It involves belonging to a *community* that shares the *Eucharist* and lives *in the Spirit*. Also for these authors Christian spirituality necessarily reaches out to everyone (:9-14).

Furthermore, Cunningham and Egan point out the Trinitarian characteristic of our faith. Christian believers do not seek an encounter with an abstract God. Rather, they seek a “dynamic living personal God who is revealed by the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit” (Cunningham & Egan 1996:13). In a similar way, Sheldrake (1998:18) engages with a Trinitarian approach and considers spirituality to be a reflection of “the nature of the divine-human relationship, and so the doctrine of the Trinity is the key element.” It is a participation in the very community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This emphasis is important for the relationship between missiology and spirituality, because it is in seeking and entering into relationship with the Triune God that Christian believers become aware of their call to, and are enabled to participate in *missio Dei*.

As with most of the authors, Bühlmann (1997:413), in his contribution on spirituality, translates the word spirituality as “life according to the Spirit.” For him it means the relationship of a person or a community to God. He refers to the *classical God-experience* of Moses at Mount Horeb. He explains that Moses wanted to linger and “the Lord shook him out of his reverie and then gave him a missionary task” not to come near but to go to the Pharaoh (:414). I do not agree with this interpretation. God commands Moses to take off his shoes as he is on Holy Ground.<sup>33</sup> God is actually inviting Moses to become aware of the presence of God and to take off or to get rid of what prevents him from being in God’s presence. God is not shaking Moses “out of his reverie.” Rather, God draws Moses’ attention to the need to be fully present to God. It is only when Moses enters into a deep experience of God – who reveals Godself to him –

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<sup>33</sup> Scholars give various interpretations about taking off the sandals. It denotes humility, renunciation to possession. It symbolises the passage from the profane world into a holy place that cannot be contaminated. Sandals, in fact, are covered by dust and dirt. The rite of taking off the sandals was in use in Jerusalem. Priests served barefoot in the Temple. Until today in some religions like Islam, it is compulsory to take off the shoes before entering the mosque (Schmidt 1988:157-158; Albertz 2012:78). Further explanations are: servants and prisoners must walk barefoot (Is 20:2), while free persons wear sandals (Ex 12:11 in anticipation of the future status). Sandals are important in legal rights (Lk 15:22) and levirate marriage (Deut 25:9; Ruth 4:7). Against this background, the removal of sandals gains an additional interpretation: Moses has to renounce, give up his self-determination and ownership claims (Fischer & Markl 2009: 50). For Buber (1968:47), the reason why Moses has to remove the sandals “may possibly be because being on holy ground, it should not be trodden by any occupying and therefore possessing shoe.”

that God sends Moses to participate in God's mission, so that through liberation the Israelites may experience and know God (Ex 6:7).

Gutiérrez, the famous liberation theologian, in his book *A Theology of Liberation* expresses the necessity for an attitude that can embrace everything, synthesise and inform the whole of life. In a word, he asserts: "We need a 'spirituality'" (1988:117). For him, spirituality is a concrete way of living the Gospel, inspired by the Spirit. It is characterised by a deep spiritual experience that is, consequently, spelt out and to which the adherents can give witness. It means to walk "in freedom according to the Spirit of love and life. This walking has its point of departure in an encounter with the Lord. Such an encounter is a spiritual experience that produces and gives meaning to freedom" (Gutiérrez 1984:35).

Spirituality is considered by Boff (1997:191) as one's "entire orientation, which is centered on life-reality (not on the will to power, or accumulation, or in pleasure) taken in its fullness and most comprehensive meaning possible." For him, spirituality is to "enhance the dignity of all life and protect and promote it" (:191) – especially the lives of the poorest and most threatened.

When the encounter with the Triune God develops into an intimate and genuine relationship, it can surely lead to conversion, transformation and the ruling out of any individualism. Indeed, this encounter and relationship with the Triune God can so enhance a person's life that one can live one's faith passionately and share it in the community. Indeed, in time, one can be inspired to commit oneself to work for justice and social transformation, as a result.

### **2.3.6 Experience in Christian Spirituality**

When considering the different definitions of Christian spirituality, it appears evident that it is about experience (Gutiérrez 1988:117; 1984:35; Collins 1999:15-17; Sheldrake 1998:36; Capra & Luisi 2014:282; for a study of term *experience* see Waaijman 2002:385-389, 397-402). Alston (1991:34) prefers to avoid the term experience as he finds it "obfuscating." In its place he uses the phrase "mystical perception."

Spirituality, as an academic discipline is, in Schneiders' view (1998:50), "the field of study which in an interdisciplinary way attempts to investigate spiritual experience as

such, i.e. as spiritual and as experience.” People in the past had spiritual experiences that gave them an understanding of God’s word and possible new insights into how to follow Jesus. These experiences were then reflected upon and became schools of spirituality, which developed into traditions, which entered the broad Christian tradition. Nowadays, spirituality is studied by scholars and is a discipline that makes use of methods and resources from various branches of knowledge (Gutiérrez 1984:52-53; Principe 1983:135-137).

Albert (in Waaijman 2002:398) explores the most important experiential moments in philosophical mysticism. By experience, he means a cognitive journey made to the very end. The German word *Erfahrung* comes from *er-fahren* that means: to travel through; to get to know. In this sense, Albert sees it as a journey in which a person experiences him/herself “as a self which finds itself in existence.” This interpretation is pertinent in the sense that “[t]his unity of personhood and existence, perceived in a lived experience, constitutes the basis for the experiences of love, presence, [and] happiness.” As a dynamic journey, it is neither static nor a once off. Rather, it is a progressive and never-ending process of encounter and growth in knowledge of self and God.

Certainly, the notion of experience of God may be questioned as not being “critical” (Sheldrake 1994:16) or “distinctive” enough. There are many factors that condition an experience. Cognitive thinking and emotional feelings are involved. It has to be borne in mind that, for instance, every spiritual experience is determined to some degree by culture. Therefore culture itself is a *text*, which has the potential for many layers of meaning (Sheldrake 2010:39). “At the same time there is something immediate about experience that leads people to rely on it for claims to certainty and truth.” (Perrin 2007:47; cf. Alston 1993:293).

Today the accent is set more on the validity or priority of experience (more especially in feminist and liberationist spiritualities). It is the experience of having been able (or not able) to enter into relationship with God and of having seen God at work in people, that renders knowing God possible.

Experience is, in Plattig’s words (2011:49-50), an *Erlebnis* that has always to be accompanied by reflection and interpretation. It should be remembered that although the preparation of the environment, the way a liturgy or moments of prayer are introduced and led, can certainly facilitate a religious experience, the real experience (*Erlebnis*) cannot be generated. What is of great importance is the openness to the unexpected and unplanned that may occur. A spiritual *Erlebnis* proves to be genuine only if it brings

about transformation of the person. It has to make the person freer, independent, mature, and more open to relationship, authentic and complete (:52).

Experience (of God) remains, in my opinion, the core of spirituality. However, because experience is a person's perception, and therefore bears in itself a certain ambiguity and subjectivity, "it needs further critical reflection to endow it with truthfulness and authenticity" (Perrin 2007:48). In a practical way, it needs to be accompanied by discernment (Cunningham & Egan 1996:20).

It has to be kept in mind that "[o]ne of the most important impulses to mission in the Bible is religious [or spiritual] experience" (Senior & Stuhlmüller 1991:329). It is through these spiritual experiences that both leaders and other persons in the Bible could find the strength to translate them into action.

### **2.3.7 Spirituality and Eucharist**

In considering Christian spirituality and Eucharist, it becomes clear that there is a reciprocity between the two. If Jesus' word and intention are taken seriously, spirituality without Eucharist causes malnourishment; and "Eucharist without spirituality would be at best formalism and at worst superstition" (Gittins 1993:27). Both have to go hand in hand, and both bring about transformation. Surely Jesus' intention was that Eucharist would be an ordinary, rather than an extraordinary circumstance (:32). From the gospels we know that closeness to, and relationship with, Jesus brought about transformation. Every time the Eucharist is celebrated, an encounter with Christ takes place in a special way. Christ comes to the person in the Eucharist in his human and divine nature and leads the person into a process of transformation into Christ (Keating 1987:11). In fact, by eating bread and drinking wine the person receives, and at the same time becomes, the body of Christ. Waaijman (2002:145) considers the Communion rite "as the contemplative moment *par excellence*."

When Christ comes to a person in the Holy Eucharist he/she assimilates him, and He assimilates the person. The person, by sharing in the Body and the Blood of Christ, becomes "united with him in the Sacrament" (Groody 2007:228-229). In Cunningham's words "we participate in God and in one another at the deepest and most intimate level" (Cunningham 1998:176). Cunningham also makes use of an image when describing the *real presence* of Christ in the Eucharist: "a body inhabiting the body of the other; we

take Christ's body into ours and in this act become the Body of Christ" (Cunningham 1998:183).

In view of the foregoing discussion, it appears clear to me that union with Christ is not something that happens in extraordinary occasions and to persons who are *particularly spiritual*. Rather it is an ordinary event in the life of a Christian, whether he/she may realise it or not. Each Christian is called to this union.

Spirituality and Eucharist, therefore, bring about transformation in the person according to the sequence of invitations/commands: come (intimacy); be healed (conversion, transformation) and go (mission) (Gittins 1993:33).

### 2.3.8 Spirituality and natural science

In the quest for a contemporary (Christian) spirituality, some consideration must be given to natural science and particularly to evolution. Without going into the details of science and the theory of evolution, it is important to mention some shifts that occurred in recent times in science which exerted an influence on theology and spirituality. Capra & Steindl-Rast (1992:xi-xv) explore the new frontiers of science and spirituality. They describe the following shifts: from the parts to the whole, from structure to process, from objective science to epistemic science, from building to network as metaphor of knowledge, from truth to approximate description.

Contemporary physics has broken with the mechanistic view of nature in Newtonian physics and Enlightenment philosophy. The deterministic world of Newton has given way to an indeterministic view of nature, in which a non-interventionist divine agency is possible. That is, "God acts without suspending or violating the scientific laws of nature" (Russell 2005:57).

When talking of quantum wholeness, there is a new way of understanding the relationship between the parts and the whole. "The properties of the parts can be understood only from the dynamics of the whole. Ultimately, there are no parts at all. What we call a part is a merely a pattern in an inseparable web of relationships" (Capra & Steindl-Rast 1992:xii).<sup>34</sup> Quantum non-separability, therefore, "suggests a 'wholeness' or 'unity' to nature ... [It] also offers a powerful metaphor for the spiritual

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<sup>34</sup> For further explanations on paradigm shifts cf. Delio 2013:24-27; Boff 1997:28-34; Nolan 2006:61-71, 207-209.



experience of intrinsic relationality within the divine life and of the unity of creation – humanity, ecology, universe” (Russell 2005:57).

Exploring the thoughts of Panikkar, Tillich, and Teilhard de Chardin, Delio (2013:68) describes creation as “a kenosis of divine love, a constant emptying of divine self into other. God becomes ‘element’ and draws all things through love into the fullness of being.” The Triune God reveals Godself as love, that is, as “the most dynamic, most relational, most unitive, and most personal love – the love of all love” (:70). The Trinity is, therefore, “the dynamic, flowing movement of evolution – Love poured into Word continuously breathed anew in Spirit” (:71).

The image of God is, therefore, no longer static (i.e. the prime mover). God can be imagined as not *in* heaven. Rather, God is a hidden mystery in ordinary reality. God reveals Godself also in everyday life (Tacey 2004:164; Delio 2013:80-81).

Scientists recognise that there is only one world, one universe. God and human souls are not in different worlds. Everything is connected in a single whole. Independent parts do not exist. There are countless systems and species, but they are all part of one whole (Nolan 2006:71).

The universe is “neither determined nor random, but creative” (Berry in Nolan 2006:211). It is in continuous evolution towards wholeness. Delio (2013:203) writes:

There is an unbearable and unstoppable energy at the heart of the cosmos that is relentless, despite billions of years of cosmic life. This yearning for wholeness is integral to the unfinished process of evolution because it is an ultimate wholeness that exceeds the human grasp. God *is* the unbearable wholeness of being, the unrelenting dynamism of love, pushing through the limits of matter to become God at the heart of this evolutionary universe. Divine love evolves the universe as it leans into an unknown future.

In this evolving cosmos, we, humans, are called to “*choose to be whole*, to be attentive to God’s ongoing work in our lives. God will not create a new future for us, but God invites us to become more whole within ourselves so that we may become more whole among ourselves” (:203). This call to wholeness is a challenge to the dualistic thinking, the Greek metaphysical framework and Aristotelian philosophy, and therefore, to the religion and the spirituality which Christians inherited. However, it is a path worthwhile taking, as we (humanity and the cosmos) are already “part in this unfolding love. We are wholes within wholes, persons within persons, religions within religions” (:208). Maybe, in Boff’s words (1997:22), it is really time now to “leave behind any sort of [absolutistic] anthropocentrism and androcentrism as illusory and

arrogant: they are capital ecological sins.”<sup>35</sup> This is the “wholeness” or “unity” that quantum non-separability suggests. This “also offers a powerful metaphor for the spiritual experience of intrinsic relationality within the divine life and of the unity of creation – humanity, ecology, universe” (Russell 2005:57).

### 2.3.9 Christian spirituality: Working definition

In the foregoing study of spirituality, I explored how it evolved in history and how it is considered today, both in secular and religious areas. I considered some of the definitions of Christian spirituality proposed by scholars. I explored the validity of experience in spirituality and I reflected upon the relationship between spirituality and Eucharist and between science and spirituality.

In the light of the above exploration and taking my personal experience into consideration, I intend to present what I consider to be the core of spirituality.

I am of the view that the core of Christian spirituality lies in one’s experience of the Triune God. Experience is an encounter that is not isolated and is not once-off, but involves one’s whole life and is ongoing. Encounter with the Triune God cannot be produced. God reveals Godself to a person; this presupposes a certain openness, availability and attentiveness on the person’s side. This means that encounter may happen if a person seeks, *spends*, *wastes* time with God, and contemplates God’s mystery. A person must remain open to God’s word, read and meditate on it as God’s word for oneself (beyond all interpretations and exegesis, which are, without doubt, important). Of the utmost importance is the participation in the Sacraments, and the contemplation of humanity, and of the world (and the cosmos) in evolution towards wholeness.

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<sup>35</sup> The anthropocentric and individualistic worldview of the West is therefore questioned. It can be asked whether an African worldview can be of help. If, on the one hand it is true, that African ontology and thought are categorised as anthropocentric then “God is the Originator and Sustainer of man [sic]; the spirits explain the destiny of man; Man [sic] is the centre of this ontology; the Animals, Plants natural phenomena and objects constitute the environment in which man [sic] lives, provide a means of existence and, if need be, man [sic] establishes a mystical relationship to them” (Mbiti 1969:16). On the other hand, African thought emphasises “the inter-relatedness or interconnectedness of human beings and the rest of nature” (Behrens 2014:65). Lenka Bula (2008:375-394) states that the concept of *Botho/Ubuntu* evokes relationality and respect for others and the whole creation – practically the right relationship to self and to other(s) and the world – can be of help to overcome the connotation of anthropocentrism commonly ascribed to this concept and to African thought at large. This is not the place to explore and study this topic in depth. However, it can be of help for further studies in missiology.

Prayer and liturgy are the Church's nourishment for its work in mission. To recall the words of the Second Vatican Council, liturgy "marvellously strengthens [the Christians'] power to preach Christ" (SC 2). Moreover "liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows" (SC 10).

As already mentioned, the experience of encounter with God can certainly happen when a person sets time aside for it. Jesus himself spent time in solitude and intimacy with the Father, and used to take his disciples aside to be with them in private (Nolan 2006:124). However, persons can experience such an encounter also in the situations of everyday life. Attentiveness is of the utmost importance to perceive God's presence. Equally important is the necessity of discernment. As indicated above, although a person may consider his/her experience as certain and true, that experience has to be *examined* through discernment, so as to make sure of its genuineness and truthfulness. For example, Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* or Teresa of Avila's *The Interior Castle* affirm the importance of attention to experience as the basis of discernment and therefore of progress in the spiritual life.

Genuine encounter with God brings about transformation in the person and necessarily urges her or him to reach out to others. Christian spirituality is a lifelong journey of personal and social transformation (Nolan 2006:122), not towards perfection but towards wholeness for oneself and the other.

At this point, a remark about primal religions needs to be made. Bediako (1995:93-95) uses a six-feature framework for understanding primal religions as authentic religions.<sup>36</sup> This six-feature framework is actually the real key to the entire structure as it conceives "the universe as a unified cosmic system, essentially spiritual" (:96). In his view, the primal world-views are fundamentally religious. For this reason, "the primal imagination [of the Christian communities of the Southern Hemisphere can offer an opportunity] to restore the ancient unity of theology [missiology] and spirituality" (:105).

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<sup>36</sup> Bediako used the framework proposed by Harold Turner in 1977, which can be summarised as follows: 1) A sense of kinship with nature at large; 2) A sense of finiteness, weakness, sinfulness that needs a power that is not its own; 3) The person is not alone in the universe but there is a "spiritual world of powers or beings more powerful and ultimate than" the person herself; 4) The person can enter into relationship with good spirits; 5) A strong sense of reality of an afterlife that explains the importance of the ancestors (living dead); and last but not least, the person "lives in a sacramental universe where there is no sharp dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual" (:95). Magesa (2013:25) also highlights that "from the African point of view, all reality is *spiritual* because it is linked together by spiritual power and is connected to mystery. Life is, in essence, a mystery."

From the above study and descriptions of mission and spirituality, it becomes clear that both have the same core or heart: encountering the Triune God. This is very important for the relationship between missiology and spirituality. Both disciplines have the same starting point and can walk hand in hand towards fruitful interface and mutual shaping.

### **2.3.10 Interspirituality: The link to missiology**

Kourie (2012:22) argues that we live in an “*Interspiritual Age*.” As we have seen above, contemporary Christian spirituality is holistic and not dogmatic, but rather open to experience and therefore open also to the (spiritual and mystical) experience of other traditions. Teasdale (1999:26-28), more than anyone, spells out what *interspirituality* is. In his words, it is “the sharing of ultimate experiences across traditions” and, as such, it can be considered to be the religion of the third millennium. Through *interspirituality* the different forms of the spiritual journey can be made available to everyone, who wants to embark on an on-going inner search across the different traditions. The relevancy of the prefix *inter* lies in “the ontological roots that tie the various traditions together and that are responsible for religions influencing each other throughout history” (Teasdale 1999:27). There exists a spiritual interdependency among religions because of the existing essential interconnectedness of the world, both in being and reality. In this interconnectedness there is a call to learn from one another and to be aware of the responsibility to humanity and to the earth.

Likewise, Tamayo (2008:147-173), in proposing a new paradigm for spirituality, inserts among the six *inter* specifications, an inter-spirituality, where barriers and antagonism are eliminated.

As spirituality is “one of the most significant factors influencing interreligious encounter” (Kritzinger 2008:782), it becomes an important feature or link for the interface and relationship between missiology and spirituality.

Moreover, it is actually through interspirituality that a dialogue between mission and prophetic voices in the world can be facilitated. Keum (2010:118) states clearly that by sharing “spiritual resources with the civil movements we could also learn from them what the most urgent mission priorities are in the contemporary world.”

At this point, it is important to stress that interspirituality does not mean becoming entangled in syncretism.<sup>37</sup> Rather the particularities of interspirituality have the potential of effecting a mutually enriching dialogue and expanding the perception of reality (Kourie 2010:27). Moreover, interspirituality is a perfect platform for the various religious traditions to commit themselves together for justice and peace, and care for the earth, which are integral parts of mission.

## **2.4 Mission spirituality**

In the previous part of this chapter, I explored the notions of mission and spirituality separately, and came to the conclusion that both have encounter with the Triune God as their core. It is clear, therefore, that mission and spirituality do not only share a common core but are indissolubly connected. In other words, they are “cohesive and inseparable” as soul and body are cohesive and inseparable. “Rootedness in the discipleship of Jesus is the only means we have of creating the ‘dynamism for mission’ which evangelization today so desperately needs, and without which ... evangelization will never be fully Christian” (Galilea 1984:4).

The Church is missionary by its very nature (AG 2) and, therefore, she “has missionary spirituality and missionary commitment as an essential dimension” (Bühlmann 1979:180). At this point, it becomes clear that mission and spirituality have to be integrated: mission has a spirituality and spirituality informs mission. The result is the concept of *mission spirituality* where being and doing, prayer and action constitute a whole. One cannot replace one with the other, and vice-versa.

### **2.4.1 Mission spirituality on a spiral path**

I now propose a way of understanding and living a relevant mission spirituality. In order to do this, I make use of the *mission spirituality spiral* (Figure 1), which I introduced earlier in Chapter One (1.6).

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<sup>37</sup> By syncretism is meant “the mixing of two [or more] religious systems to the point where at least one, if not both, of the systems loses basic structure and identity” (Schreier 1985:144).

### **2.4.1.1 An “old and new” tool: The *mission spirituality spiral***

Before describing the *mission spirituality spiral*, it is necessary to state that it is not wholly my own creation but owes its foundational concepts to the thought of other authors.

I developed it further from the *pastoral circle* of Insertion-Analysis-Theological Reflection-Pastoral Planning devised by Holland and Henriot (1983:7-9). I also drew on further developments of Cochrane, De Gruchy, and Petersen (1991:13-15), Karecki (2005:159-173) and of Kritzinger (2011:49-51). These scholars include spirituality in their framework. Cochrane, De Gruchy, and Petersen (1991:75) state that spirituality is implicit in other pastoral models, and they want to make it explicit in their own model. One of these models they refer to, seems to be the pastoral circle described by Holland and Henriot (1983:7.8). “The first step in a practical methodology for social analysis is called ‘conversion’ ... it implies a turning to values” (:96). This means, in my view, that this *conversion* is only possible when encounter and relationship with God occurs.

Karecki (2005:159-173) places spirituality at the centre of the pastoral circle, and Kritzinger (2011:49-51) places it at the centre of his matrix. I am also of the opinion that, spirituality occupies the central part. However, I am using the symbol of a spiral rather than a circle.

### **2.4.1.2 Why a spiral?**

At this point, the question might be raised: Why a spiral and not a circle or a matrix as proposed by other scholars? Even the notion of a spiral is not wholly new. I drew on Van Schalkwyk (1996:56-57), who makes use of a spiral, when proposing a dynamic process of creation-recreation (creation, resurrection, death, recreation) within history for the involvement of churches and Christian communities in development. Karecki (2010:1-6) also makes use of a spiral to illustrate her contemplative mission spiral.

A circle certainly expresses movement from one dimension to the other. It denotes circularity and mobility. However, the dimensions can remain at the same level and not gain depth. Thus, I opted for a spiral because it is neither linear nor circular – rather, it

acquires depth. Holland and Henriot (1983:9), in fact, consider their *circle* to be more like a *spiral*, as each approach “does not simply retrace old steps but breaks new grounds.”

Cornish, drawing on the Pastoral Circle of Holland and Henriot, elaborates a pastoral spiral by means of an Ignatian approach. The spiral is not closed – it is open, – and so, “action leads to a new reality, new experience to the examined” (Cornish 2013).

A spiral denotes a continuous and ever deepening ongoing process.

## Mission Spirituality Spiral

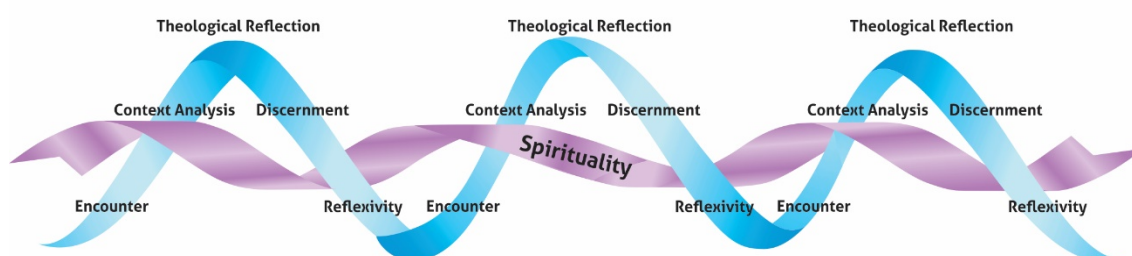


Figure 1

### 2.4.2 The dimensions of the spiral

It is time now to elucidate the six dimensions of my mission spirituality spiral. They are: Spirituality (encounter with the Triune God); Encounter (with the others and the context); Context Analysis; Theological Reflection (encounter with Scripture and Tradition); Discernment (for transformative ways of being in mission); and Reflexivity.

#### 2.4.2.1 Spirituality

As I have already dealt at length with spirituality in the earlier part of the chapter, here, I simply reaffirm that Christian spirituality is about the experience of encounter and relationship with the Triune God.

Spirituality is at the core of the spiral, informing and shaping each dimension. The encounter and the ongoing relationship with God is not just a *starter*, it is a constant in the spiral. It informs, enhances, and permeates all the other dimensions.

Before moving to the next dimension, it is important to return to the Trinity, so as to draw attention to the idea of relationality in the Trinity. For Cunningham (1998:165) “God is *wholly constituted* by relationality ... the Three [persons] are *mutually constitutive* of one another.” Cunningham describes this “as a Trinitarian virtue of *participation*.” This participation in one another is so profound that the Three cannot be understood independently from one another. Likewise, Christians are called, by echoing the mutual indwelling of the Trinity, to choose to enter into relationships “as mutually indwelling and indwelt,” and therefore not to live as “individuals,” who may even choose not to enter into relationships (Cunningham 1998:166).

This said, the next steps flow logically from the first: the encounter with others and with the context in which they live.

### **2.4.2.2 Encounter**

The second dimension on the spiral is Encounter with others and their context. In Chapter One (1.10.4), I presented the term *transformative encounter*, and I now reflect upon it more deeply.

In the previous section, I stressed the fact that from genuine encounter with God, emerges the call to encounter, to enter into a relationship with another. The first criterion for defining an encounter as mission encounter, is that one must be moved and inspired by the Holy Spirit. Here I refer to a text from the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 8:26-40), in which Luke describes the encounter of Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch. In v. 26 it is an angel who speaks to Philip. In v. 29 it is the Spirit. One should not think that Luke puts angels and the Spirit on the same level. Rather, they serve the same purpose of leading Philip to an encounter that is desired by God (cf. Acts 10:3, 19) (Barrett 1994:427). After this encounter prompted by the Spirit, the eunuch continues his journey back to Ethiopia, where he probably becomes the first missionary in that land. This shows that in fulfilment of Acts 1:8, the Spirit raises witnesses, who from Jerusalem will reach “the ends of the earth.” At that time Ethiopia was considered to be one of the ends of the earth (Scott 1994:535).

Secondly, fruitful mission encounter with other(s) happens to the extent that both interlocutors are free from prejudice. Each person carries within him/herself biases, stances, and prejudices, but one must recognise that fact and embark upon a journey of



conversion<sup>38</sup> in order to overcome them. Despite the differences between persons it is important that they regard one another as *holy ground* that cannot be violated by any sense of superiority or desire for domination. Likewise, a sense of inferiority or oppression and the desire for reversal or revenge need to be avoided. Both persons need to be open to the dynamic of *give-and-receive*.

Thirdly, mission encounters carry in themselves the potential for creativity. When differences are considered as an opportunity for growth, and not as an obstacle to the encounter, new perspectives and possibilities can open up.

Fourthly, transformation does occur. When two persons meet, bearing in themselves the previous criteria, transformation takes place. It is, at first, their personal transformation – already started in eliminating their own biases and prejudices – that will have positive repercussions on the Church and the society at large.

Mission encounter also privileges the poor and abandoned. Scripture inspires us to encounter the poor (Is 58:7; Mt 19:21; Lk 4:18; Lk 14:13; Lk 18:22 etc.). Jesus himself became poor (Phil 2:5-8). At the beginning of his ministry at Nazareth, He makes use of the slightly changed quotation from the book of Isaiah (61:1-2) to show that he was sent to fulfil the promise and to announce the good news to the poor (Lk 4:18).

Daniel Comboni, the founder of the Comboni Missionary Sisters, dedicated his whole life to the poorest and most abandoned who, in his view, were the Africans. In the *Rules and Organisation of the Institute for the Missions of Africa in Verona*, Comboni (2.1872, in *Writings*:2799) writes: “The ultimate purpose of the Institute for the Missions of Africa is especially the conversion to the Catholic faith of the poor [sic] black peoples of Central Africa, who are the poorest and most abandoned peoples in the world.”

Building on liberation theologians, such as Gustavo Gutiérrez and Leonardo Boff who prioritised the option for the poor (this point has been explored in 2.1.5), Pope Francis continuously calls the faithful to encounter the poor and care for them. A few examples may suffice here. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, he exhorts the faithful to make a commitment to the poor (EG 97) and advocates the inclusion of the poor in society (EG 186-216). So, too, he calls people “to hear the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (LS 49), because the poor are, in fact, the most deeply affected by the ecological crisis.

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<sup>38</sup> Holland and Henriot (1983:96) consider conversion the first step in doing social analysis.

Encounter does not occur merely with persons. One also encounters the context, in which people live. Holland and Henriot (1983:8) call this *insertion*. I prefer to call it encounter because it best describes closeness and relationship, not only to others, but also to the context. The kind of encounter I propose is not a sporadic one. Rather, it is an encounter that derives from living in a context with local people. It implies having time for *being* with the people at the same level (*auf Augenhöhe*), listening to them – to their joys and sorrows. It is only this kind of encounter which will, in due time, develop into mutual acquaintance and friendship.

### **2.4.2.3 Context analysis**

When mission encounter with others and their context has occurred, the following step is the analysis of that context.

For context analysis, I have to return to the pastoral circle developed by Holland and Henriot (1983:7-8). The scholars call this dimension social analysis. It is a critical analysis of the social, political, historical, economic, and ecclesial situation of that context. It “examines causes, probes consequences, delineates linkages, and identifies actors” (:8) and cultural aspects. Context analysis is a tool that helps situate experiences against a broader background. In a word, context analysis allows us to grasp the reality that has to be dealt with, in relation to the lives of the people (:14).

Holland and Henriot (1983:13) consider this kind of analysis to be “simply an extension of the principle of discernment, moving from the personal realm to the social.” I agree with them in the sense that this analysis cannot be merely *technical* – it involves theological reflection (:92-93). To this, I add openness of heart, and prayer. On the other hand, discernment occupies, in my view, a specific moment that comes after having examined the context, *encountered* Scripture and Tradition. Social analysis, in fact, “will not provide programmatic answers ... [It] offers broader parameters within which specific tactics and strategies can be suggested, but it does not formulate them” (:15). Context analysis is a part of the discernment for transformative ways of being in mission.

#### 2.4.2.4 Theological reflection

When engaging in theological reflection, one may think of simply reflecting on the Holy Scripture and the Christian tradition. Two traditional *loci* where this was done were in universities or seminaries, and in the meeting halls of bishops and popes. It was therefore either on academic or ecclesial (or the two combined) levels, that theological reflection took place (Hug 1983:2).

Today, theological reflection certainly continues in the above *loci* but it is no longer confined only to the domain of theologians or clergy. Christians, even without theological formation, are increasingly enabled to engage in theological reflection, by virtue of their faith, their experience of God and the connection they make between their life and spiritual experience, and with Scripture and Tradition.<sup>39</sup>

There are various ways of defining theological reflection. I intend to consider only two.

For Holland and Henriot (1983:9), theological reflection is

an effort to understand more broadly and deeply the analysed experience in the light of living faith, scripture, church social teaching, and the resources of Tradition. The Word of God brought to bear upon the situation raises new questions, suggests new insights, and opens new responses.

In order to develop changes in social and political structures, the two authors focus more on social analysis. Their approach to theological reflection is, according to Foley (2015:131), underdeveloped in comparison to social analysis. In their approach, the personal experience of encounter with people and their context and the relevance of this for a person's life, does not seem to have been much developed. Holland and Henriot (1983:96) state that conversion is the first step in social analysis, as it "implies a turning to values." Yet, they do not indicate to which values they refer. Theological reflection does not simply mean "turning to values." It must necessarily effect changes also in the person who embarks upon it. These changes should occur in both his/her personal, social, and religious life, to the same extent that he/she aims to change social and political structures.

Foley (2015:30) shifts from theological reflection, through interfaith dialogue and interfaith theological reflection, to get to what he calls *reflective believing*. In his view,

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<sup>39</sup> For a good background on experience, reflection groups, prayer etc. in theological reflection, the book *Tracing the Spirit* (Hug 1983), despite not being so recent, is still valid.

reflective believing “often starts with personal or communal experiences that are subsequently narrated by individuals in the hope of discerning some meaning from these experiences” (:29). On the one hand, this definition positively shows a great openness to personal and communal experience and a great respect and “sense of wonder at the range and depths of another’s believing” (:31), whether he/she belongs to a belief system or is atheistic. On the other hand, the concern with social change does not come out very clearly.

I intend to keep the term *theological reflection* for this fourth dimension of the spiral, although believers of other religions may have difficulty with it (Foley 2015:28). The epithet *theological* is intended to convey, not only, discourse about God, but also, discourse regarding the personal experience of God, which is fundamental to any reflection in missiological and spiritual discourse.

Theological reflection in my spiral is contextualised. It starts with the personal and communal spiritual experience and interpretation of Scripture and Tradition in a particular context, and then it looks at and links to the interpretation of Scripture and Tradition of the Church.

#### **2.4.2.5 Discernment for transformative ways of being in mission**

The fifth dimension of the mission spirituality spiral is discernment. When engaging in mission, it is not a matter of simply planning what to do, or which project to start. Before embarking on planning, it is indispensable to go through a process of discernment. The previous dimensions of the spiral are intended to culminate in discernment, so as to lead into new ways of being in mission.

In Chapter One (1.5.3), I explored what discernment is and how it can be done. It suffices here to recall that discernment finds its context in personal and communal prayer. In discernment, Christians need to read “the signs of the times” and interpret them in the light of the Gospel (GS 2).

The aim of discernment is to find new ways of being in mission. I choose not to use the word *strategies* for mission, because that is more appropriate in the commercial world of competitive enterprises. Although this *enterprise-way* of thinking and doing mission has been prevalent for a long time and to some extent still is, it is not the way I

intend to go. We (missiologists and Christians in general), through discernment and the other dimensions of the spiral, must find transformative ways of being in mission. Action has to be prompted by the Spirit and thus, happen in *bold humility*.

#### **2.4.2.6 Reflexivity**

I come to the last, but not least, dimension of the spiral – Reflexivity. In fact, it is not the last step. Rather, it should feature throughout the process. When embarking on the spiral, one (or a community) has to engage in reflexivity all the time.

There are various types of reflexivity.<sup>40</sup> Swinton and Mowat (2006:59) define reflexivity as “the process of critical self-reflection carried out by the researcher throughout the research process that enables her to monitor and respond to her contribution to the proceedings.” This kind of critical self-reflection is very important. The persons who embark upon the mission spirituality spiral are to critically reflect on themselves, and on the way their experiences, values and faith shape the progression along the spiral (Swinton & Mowat 2006:59-60).

Moreover, a reflection or evaluation must take place on how the framework of the spiral has been followed, as well as, on the actions undertaken. An important question to ask is: Has the experience of progressing along the spiral brought learning and transformation, not only, to the people in a particular context, but also, to the ones, who embarked on the mission spirituality spiral process? Or, in other words: how have the experiences of encounter with God, with other(s), with the context, Scripture and Tradition, and with discernment, affected and possibly changed those engaging in this process?

### **2.5 Concluding comments**

In this chapter I have explored mission, spirituality and have demonstrated that they are indissolubly connected. In the last part of the chapter I developed the concept of mission spirituality by means of the mission spirituality spiral with its six dimensions.

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<sup>40</sup> Flanagan (2007) explores some of them in connection with theology.

I propose that mission spirituality be studied and lived through the six dimensions of the spiral, so that missiologists, Christians, and in particular, the Comboni Missionary Sisters may discern and live transformative mission.

In the next chapter, I intend to study the life and the mission spirituality of Daniel Comboni, making use of the above understanding of mission spirituality. The intention is to explore to what extent, Daniel Comboni lived the dimensions of the spiral, and therefore to verify whether it is – as I believe it is – a useful tool for studying mission spirituality.

# Chapter Three

## The life and mission spirituality of Daniel Comboni

### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on Daniel Comboni, the founder of the Comboni Missionary Sisters. He led a very full and eventful life, but for the purpose of this research, I focus only on those aspects that are relevant – the historical and religious background, in which he grew up; events that influenced his vocation to the priesthood and to Africa; his missionary life; and finally his mission spirituality in its various dimensions.

My purpose is to examine the influences that shaped and formed his approach to mission, and then to analyse if, and to what extent, he exhibited the dimensions of my mission spirituality spiral.

My main sources for the research about Comboni's life and spirituality are his writings<sup>41</sup> and the *Positio super virtutibus ex officio Concinnata*.<sup>42</sup> The *Positio* is that body of research resulting from the stringent examination, conducted by the Catholic Church, to establish whether a person is eligible for canonisation. This process is overseen by the Congregation of the Causes of Saints of the Roman Curia in the Vatican. It involves a thorough examination of the way of life of the candidate, the heroic virtues he displayed and miracles attributed to his intercession.

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<sup>41</sup> They constitute a *corpus* of great proportions. This corpus includes letters from Comboni dated from December 1850 until 4 October 1881; reports to main mission associations in Europe, and to Propaganda Fide (*The Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of Faith*, which was founded in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV for the transmission and dissemination of the faith throughout the world. Today it is called *The Congregation for the Evangelisation of peoples*). It also includes pastoral letters, lectures, contracts for leases of houses, agreements with companies, financial reports, and copies of his will (Chiocchetta 1982:11).

<sup>42</sup> The *Positio* consists of two volumes (I and II). Hereafter, quotations from this work will be indicated as *Positio* I, or *Positio* II, followed by the page number.

My choice of the *Positio* as the main source is due to the fact that it supplies a vast body of literature, providing copies of various documents, declarations and letters to or about Comboni, and also because a good part of the recent Combonian literature draws upon it.

## **3.2 Comboni's background**

### **3.2.1 Historical context**

Daniel Comboni was born in Northern Italy at Limone sul Garda, a small village at Garda Lake in 1831. Since the Congress of Vienna, in 1815, the village was part of the Lombardo-Veneto kingdom and belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This was a time of libertarian ferment (*Risorgimento*) that through independence wars led to the annexation of Limone and the whole of Lombardy to the Kingdom of Italy in 1815. Verona and Veneto were annexed at a later stage (*Positio* I:6).

About the middle of the nineteenth century a series of circumstances drew the attention of Europe to the southern part of the Mediterranean. These included: the political activism of Egypt that turned the balance in the Mediterranean upside down; the political and economic revolution that would have occurred through the opening of the Suez Canal. Moreover, new ways were discovered to sail the Nile; the reports given by the explorers; the richness of resources that would be found in Africa and the possibility of connecting the Upper Nile with the Red Sea (Romanato 1998:109).

After 1788, when the *British African Association* (known as the African Association) was founded in London, Africa had become the object of exploration. However, at that time, since access to the interior was very difficult owing to the geographical conditions, the whole area from the Sahara desert right down to the Cape was still *terra incognita*. Owing to a deadly climate, dangers and sicknesses, for which immunisation had not yet been developed, a great number of explorers lost their lives (Romanato 1998:52-55; González Fernández 2003:18). So too, a great number of missionaries lost their lives owing to the lethal climate (Schmid 1987: 292-293; Comboni to Cardinal Alessandro Franchi 2.6.1874, in *Writings*:3602; Comboni to Msgr. Joseph Girardin 3.5.1877, in *Writings*:4580).



### 3.2.2 Ecclesial context

The period from the end of the eighteenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century, was a difficult time in the history of the Catholic Church in Europe. With increasing secularisation, the Church was left without a hierarchical organisation and had to reorganise herself. Now made poor, she had only her spiritual and moral forces to count on. As a consequence, Catholicism experienced a renaissance (Schmid 1987: 33-35). This renaissance was also experienced in mission activities, which, during the eighteenth century had suffered a great setback owing to both internal and external causes. Among the external causes, we find the growing English and Dutch imperialism, the expulsion of missionaries and the shutting down of missions in India, Louisiana and Ceylon by England. To this, we can add, the “Regalist politic of the Bourbons and the obstructionism of Portuguese patronage in India and in the East” (González Fernández 2003:39, my translation).

As far as the Church is concerned, González Fernández (2003:40) mentions the following internal factors: the issues concerning the *Chinese and Malabar rites*, which were only to be solved in 1939, and the resultant disputes among missionaries due to these issues, and the European religious crisis that caused a decrease in religious vocations and the decay of various religious congregations. We also need to add the rationalist mentality of the Enlightenment under the name of Modernity that affected the ecclesial environment, the expulsion of the Jesuits from Portuguese, French, and Spanish territories and the subsequent suppression of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1773.

### 3.2.3 Mission Renaissance

In such an environment, however, the apostolic spirit of the Church was not extinguished. After the French revolution, the Church experienced a mission awakening, and due also to the Romantic literature that aroused religious feelings, a strong sense of restoration arose, with an interest in archaeology and ancient history. The romantic longing for unknown distant lands, the activities of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of Faith (Propaganda Fide), and geographical discoveries, as well as the colonial expansion of most of the European countries, greatly

contributed to the mission renaissance of the nineteenth century (Chiocchetta & Gilli 1977:19-20). The desire for the conversion of non-Catholics was mixed with the desire to explore new lands and get to know new peoples.

As a consequence of this mission renaissance in Europe, the societies for mission animation mushroomed. They represent one of the phenomena of the Catholic renaissance. These societies were inspired by and modelled on the *Society for the Propagation of the Faith*, which was founded in Lyon, France in 1822. Arens (1922:8) states that in the period from 1818 until 1921, at least 246 such societies were founded. In general these can be divided into three groups according to their aims. These are: the financial and spiritual support of the mission activities; the awakening of mission awareness and zeal; and the promotion of vocations in Europe (Arens 1922:7).

Comboni was in contact with these societies, particularly the *Marienverein*<sup>43</sup> in Vienna, Austria and the *Society of Cologne*,<sup>44</sup> in Germany. He also visited them, and used to send regular reports to them (To the Committee of the *Marienverein* 2.9.1873, in *Writings*:3406-3410 is one example).

The *Marienverein* was responsible for the administrative and religious mission in Sudan. The members of these societies of mission animation committed themselves to daily prayer and a monthly contribution for the work of the society. This guaranteed that the work of the missionaries was able to continue (Romanato 1998:112-113). From 1862 the *Marienverein* experienced a crisis owing to “misadventures and poor results in Africa [that] cooled down the interest and the generosity of the benefactors” (Schmid 1987:174, my translation). Comboni, to whom the society was entrusted in 1872, succeeded in reviving it, but regrettably, just for a short time. In 1892 it had to undergo a process of total reorganisation, and it came to an end around 1920-1921 (Schmid 1987:174-175).

During this period, the production of missionary literature also increased enormously. For example, the *Lettres édifiantes*,<sup>45</sup> with their mission stories had a great

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<sup>43</sup> For detailed information about the *Marienverein*, cf. Arens (1922:269-230) and Schmid (1987:164-179).

<sup>44</sup> The Society of Cologne (Verein zur Unterstützung der armen Negerkinder in der zentralafrikanischen Mission) was founded in 1852 in Cologne. Arens (1922:182-183) provides detailed information about the Society of Cologne. The Society (in Grancelli 1923:67 and *Positio* I:206, my translation) declares that the Plan of Comboni (details about the Plan in session 3.2.3.4) “due to its simplicity, deserves the highest consideration and the necessary support.” The Society also granted him, in addition, a yearly financial support of five thousand Francs (To the Society of Cologne 1876, in *Writings*:4393).

<sup>45</sup> These were a collection of letters sent to Europe by Jesuit missionaries in China, America, India, and the East. González Fernández (2003:43) provides a list of such *Lettres*.

influence on the people in Europe. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, over 300 mission magazines were published in Europe (Schmid 1987:38). These magazines contributed enormously to spreading information about mission activities and increasing mission interest and awareness in Europe.

### **3.2.4 The mission struggle against slavery in Africa**

The struggle against slavery had started one century earlier in pietistic, Anglican, and in philanthropic circles. The movement for the abolition of slavery triumphed in 1807 with the abolition of slave trade in the English colonies and, in 1834, with slavery finally being declared illegal. These events were to have consequences for mission activities. Missionaries were concerned about black slaves as they were not considered and treated as persons. They were moved by the motto *the love of God urges us towards the poorest and most abandoned* (González Fernández 2003:71). The various missionary institutes that ransomed slaves – like those of Fr. Nicola Mazza and Ludovico Casoria, and the activities of Daniel Comboni – have their roots in the struggle against slavery (González Fernández 2003:45-46, 71; Schmid 1987:39).

It is important to draw attention to the fact that the protagonists of the mission movement operated in an environment, in Europe and the USA, that was hostile towards black Africans – and this exacerbated the practice of slavery. Actually, the mission movement was born as a reaction to the drama of slavery and to the racist mentality widespread in Europe and the USA (González Fernández 2003:23). Some even looked for a biblical foundation to justify the slave trade of black Africans. They referred to a distorted interpretation of the biblical text<sup>46</sup> claiming that the curse of Noah would be passed from Ham to Black peoples (:24-25, 56). Lécuyer (1988: 595-608) shows how this idea was common in the nineteenth century. This prejudice degraded Africans who were considered “beyond help, beyond redemption, depriving them not only of their good name but even of the right of having one” (Chiocchetta 1982:113).

Comboni, too, – a son of his time – knew the theme of the curse of Ham and often referred to it (To Dr. Benedetto Patuzzi 15.3.1858, in *Writings*:386).<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, he

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<sup>46</sup> “When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said, ‘Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.’ He also said, ‘Blessed by the Lord my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave’” (Gen 9:24-26).

<sup>47</sup> Other references on this subject can be found in the *Writings* under the following numbers: 844, 959, 2002, 2300, 2310, 2313.

considered it as a common stereotype. It would seem that it was that curse, which Comboni cites over thirty times in letters and reports that was the reason for discovering “the universal paternity of God, the inconsistency of any racial discrimination, and therefore, the equality between blacks and whites, both redeemed by the cross of Christ” (Chiocchetta & Gilli 1977:81, my translation). In the *Postulatum* (24.6.1870, in *Writings*:2314) – the petition presented to the First Vatican Council – Comboni insists that “since it has been decreed that the solemn blessing of the New Covenant was to cancel all the curses of the Old, it would be a most noble glory for the Vatican Ecumenical Council to have hastened the fulfilment of this promise.” Besides the motivations produced in the Circular to the Council Fathers (4.6.1870, in *Writings*:2298-2300) and in the *Postulatum* (24.6.1870, in *Writings*:2310-2314), a few examples may suffice to show that Comboni sees this curse but also how this curse is overcome. “God in his greatness will cancel once and for all the terrible curse which has borne down for so many centuries on the miserable children of Ham, and his blessing of peace will spread over the great family of the Africans, there to remain forever” (The Plan 18.9.1864, in *Writings*:844). “The God of all mercies will erase the mark of malediction which has for so many centuries burdened the sons of Ham” (To Fr. Nicola Mazza 31.10.1864, in *Writings*:935). In the report to the President of the Society of Cologne (27.12.1867, in *Writings*:1551), Comboni recounts the encounter of the Pope with nine black girls who had their education at Mazza Institute and writes: “Pius IX recognises the plight of many tribes and great peoples who are still moaning under barbarous slavery and among the shadows of death and on which still weighs the tremendous curse of Canaan” and continues talking about how “their expression shows signs of intelligence, spirit and dedication; their conduct, respectful, modest and thoughtful” (:1552). In the Consecration of Africa [in Italian *Nigrizia*] to Our Lady of La Salette [Notre Dame de La Salette] (26.7.1868, in *Writings*:1638-1639), Comboni wants to obtain the patronage of the Virgin Mary for “the Catholic apostolate, the mission to the cursed race of Canaan, to the poor blacks who live in those vast regions, as yet unexplored, of Central Africa ... I have devoted myself ... to the conversion of Africans who are still unbelieving despite the efforts of the Church, even if the Blood of Jesus Christ has redeemed them and ... [Mary has] also adopted them as [her] children on Mount Calvary.”

In the fourth edition of the Plan (1871, in *Writings*:2742), Comboni is more cautious about the curse. The Catholic, driven by a divine power “would enclose in his

arms in an embrace of peace and of love those unfortunate brothers [sic] of his [the Africans], upon whom it seemed that the fearful curse of Canaan still bore down.” The curse here *seemed* still to bear down upon them, and this is reflected especially in the situation of slavery. In a letter to Fr. Bartolomeo Roller (12.5.1878, in *Writings*:5153), that appeals for the famine that hit Central Africa, Comboni cites again the anathema of Canaan that still weighs on those peoples. Yet, “[t]he hour has struck for the redemption of Africa.”

Indeed, the truth of the biblical curse might have been confirmed for Comboni by the conditions of the African continent with its inclement climate, and especially by the deplorable condition inflicted on the Africans by the shameful practice of slavery. They “are brutalised by the horrors of the most inhuman slavery, and ... are reduced to the condition of beasts by ... the boundless cruelty of their enemies and oppressors” (Rules of the Institute for the Missions of Africa 1871, in *Writings*:2700). Slavery “debases and degrades humanity and reduces to the ignoble condition of brutes human beings endowed, like us, with the light of intelligence – itself a reflection of God and a likeness of the Most August Trinity” (To Fr. Francesco Bricolo 2.1.1861, in *Writings*:500).

With this deep belief, Comboni courageously denounced the slave trade. In a letter to an Austrian nobleman, Comboni writes

Your lordship will have read ... *that the slave trade was completely suppressed and that the roads are open from Gondokoro to the Equator and from the Equator to Zanzibar*. All this is false: the mission in Central Africa is forced to witness the horrible agonies the vile merchants of human flesh inflict on the most unfortunate Africans (18.8.1873, in *Writings*:3363).

[He continues:] The abolition of the slave trade in Central Africa is a dead letter ... What will really abolish the slave trade will be the preaching of the Gospel and the establishment of the Catholic Church in these unfortunate lands (:3367, italics in original).<sup>48</sup>

The above account of the historical and ecclesial context is intended to give an idea of the time and the situation in which Comboni lived.

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<sup>48</sup> Detailed information about Comboni’s activities against slavery are provided in the *Positio* I:738-773.

### 3.3 Comboni's life

#### 3.3.1 Early life

As mentioned earlier, Daniel Comboni was born at Limone sul Garda on 15 March 1831. He was the son of Luigi Comboni, a gardener at the olive grove and lemonary, and Domenica Pace (Grancelli 1923:2).<sup>49</sup> His was a poor family. Daniel Comboni was the fourth child of eight. A set of twins was stillborn and the others passed away after birth or whilst still very young. Only Daniel survived. His family was poor and marked by suffering due to the frequent mourning (*Positio* I:12-14).

At that time, Limone was a village where everything smacked of religion. Signs of faithful religious observance were in evidence – the sound of the church bells, the schedule of Masses and religious functions and devotions. Comboni lived in this environment for the first ten years of his life (Romanato 1998:190; *Positio* I:9-10). Signs that were yet to flourish of Comboni's vocation to the priesthood can be traced back to his childhood. He was a good altar server, he wanted to know everything about religion and religious celebrations. He was assiduous at catechesis. At home he built a small chapel where he imitated songs and prayer of the Church (Capovilla in *Positio* I:26).

#### 3.3.2 Vocation

##### 3.3.2.1 Vocation to priesthood develops at Mazza Institute

It was poverty that forced the young Daniel to enter the Mazza Institute in Verona in February 1843. However, this was providential as the founder of the Institute, Fr. Mazza – a priest from Verona – was to exert a powerful influence on his life, and it was there that his vocation to Africa and to the priesthood was nurtured. He was ordained a priest on 31 December 1853 (Romanato 1998:191-192).

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<sup>49</sup> Grancelli is the second biographer of Daniel Comboni. He presents a very detailed biography of Comboni. The first biography was written by Franz Xavier Geyer in 1882. It was written in German with the title *Monsignor Daniel Comboni Bischof von Claudiopolis i.p.i. und apostolischer Vicar von Central-Africa. Eine Lebensskizze von Fr. Xavier Geyer, Cand. Theol. Alumnus des arikanischen Collegs in Verona* (*Positio* II:1028). The *Positio* (II:1034-1079) presents the Italian translation of this biography.

Fr. Mazza founded two Institutes (one for girls and one for boys), to assist young people, who had the potential, but owing to financial constraints, could not afford a good education. In order to be admitted to the Institute, the young boys had to possess these three qualities: they had to be “highly intelligent, [with] good manners, and sound judgement” (Grancelli 1923: 5; *Positio* I:78-79, my translation). The Institute would guarantee a sound education right up to the degree level. Those boys who chose the priesthood would receive a stricter training. Comboni chose to become a priest.

The pedagogical method employed at the Institute was based on persuasion rather than on imposition. Self-education, discipline with a good balance between freedom and constraint, a deep appreciation for the opportunity they had been given and the desire to give back, and a strong sense of duty, were the pillars of the education at Mazza Institute. These principles characterised Comboni’s entire life (Romanato 1998:194).

Powerful influences received at the Institute, enabled Comboni to develop a solid spirituality based on a deep sense of God and a genuine desire to seek and do God’s will. He also developed an extraordinary trust in Divine Providence, a spiritual strength in time of trials, and a faith that was translated into living charity (*Positio* I:85-86). All these assumed characteristics gave him courage and strength necessary to face the challenges of his missionary life.

### **3.3.2.2 Vocation and commitment to Africa**

It seems that it was during the early years at the Institute that the first seeds of Comboni’s vocation to Africa were sown. Comboni ascribes his missionary vocation to the reading of the book about the history of the Japanese martyrs, by Alfonso de Liguori (*Positio* I:225). During the years at the Mazza Institute, Comboni had contact with and was influenced by the missionary ideal that, although still in an embryonic form and not well-developed yet, was circulating in that area. Mazza had a missionary passion, which he transmitted to Comboni. Mazza had a plan in place, whereby every year some African girls would be ransomed and given solid education in Italy for a period of ten years. They would then return to Africa where they would engage in mission activities in collaboration with Mazza’s missionaries there (*Positio* I:79-80, 105-107). The girls would then marry boys, who were already converted and would start Christian families. Those who did not get married, would teach about faith in Christ and civil culture. This

plan was unrealistic and would have faced a series of unknowns. The *de-africanisation* applied to these young people made this project unsuccessful. Comboni makes it clear in his Plan (5.9.1864, in *Writings*:806):

Experience has shown that in Europe Africans cannot receive a complete Catholic education which enables them subsequently to be dependable, in body and soul, in promoting in their native land the propagation of the faith. This is because either they cannot live in Europe or, by the time they return to Africa, they have become unsuitable for that continent because of the European habits which have become almost second nature to them, habits which become repugnant and harmful in the conditions of African life.

The European climate was treacherous for these young people, just as the African climate was treacherous for a great number of missionaries. The approach of the Plan was too schematic and lacked African experience. Even Propaganda Fide was not in favour of this Plan (Grancelli 1923:12-13; *Positio* I:106; Romanato 1998:208). However, it was from the failure of this plan that Comboni learnt much. And, in time, he came up with a different proposal in his Plan. I elaborate on his Plan later in this chapter (3.3.6).

The mission societies of that time were well known in Verona and Comboni had the opportunity to read various missionary magazines – such as the *Memorie di religione, morale e letteratura*, and the *Annali della propagazione della fede* – to which the Institute subscribed. Moreover, there was a good number of missionaries from Verona working in different parts of the world, who were corresponding with those in their home city (Romanato 1998:201-202).

It is important to mention that Comboni, in 1877, in writing the historical report to the Society of Cologne (in *Writings*:4771-4975), recalled an episode that he traces back to 1848. It was at that time that he met a former African slave in Verona. He was a Nubian from South Kordofan in Sudan. He had become a fervent Catholic and Comboni thought that this man could evangelise his own people back home. Comboni (:4840) told him several times “I will have no peace until I have established the Cross of Christ in your homeland.” He, in time, did indeed accomplish what he promised. This is borne out by the testimony of the Archbishop of Khartoum, Zubeir Wako (1998:107), who remembers him “as the holy refounder of the Church in Sudan, as our Grandfather in the faith, and our greatest human benefactor.”

Comboni’s missionary zeal and his interest in Central Africa grew to such an extent that he decided to formalise his vocation through a missionary oath he took in



front of Fr. Mazza. Comboni recalls this event years later, in 1876, in a report to Propaganda Fide (in *Writings*:4083)

It was in January 1849 that, as a 17-year-old student in philosophy, at the feet of my venerable Superior Fr. Mazza, I vowed to consecrate my whole life to the apostolate of Central Africa. And, by the grace of God, I have never broken my vow whatever the circumstances, never trying to do anything else but to equip myself for this most holy enterprise.

After this oath, he diligently prepared himself for missionary life in Africa. Besides meeting the requirement of the curriculum in his priestly studies, he also studied languages and medicine. Four years after his priestly ordination, Comboni was ready for his first mission experience to the Sudan. At this point, he felt he needed *definitive advice* about his vocation. On the one hand, he states: “I had been yearning for this moment for a very long time and with more passion than two ardent lovers longing for the moment of their wedding” (To Fr. Pietro Grana 4.7.1857, in *Writings*:3). On the other hand, he, as the only surviving son, knew that by embracing the idea of the Missions he would make martyrs of his poor parents (:7). That is why, in August 1857, he took his final decision to embark on mission only after going through discernment during the spiritual exercises by the Stigmatines<sup>50</sup> and in consultation with his spiritual director Fr. Marani (*Positio* I:227; To Fr. Pietro Grana 13.8.1857, in *Writings*:13).

It appears clear, therefore, that Comboni’s decision to be a missionary, and a missionary in Africa, was made at a deep level, and is the result of an encounter and relationship with God. On the basis of all this, I maintain that spirituality was for Comboni the *motor* of mission.

Comboni, as a member of the Mazza Institute, left for Alexandria on 10 September 1857, together with five other priests and a lay person. They first visited the Holy Land (Grancelli 1923:18-19) and on 12 October, in a letter to his parents (in *Writings*:27-85), he describes the visit to the holy places. The group of missionaries arrived at Holy Cross mission station in the Sudan on 14 February 1858. Most of his companions died in that expedition and Comboni himself, who often had fever attacks, was obliged to return to Italy in September 1859. After recovering, he continued his priestly duties at the Mazza Institute (*Positio* I:108-110, 474-476).

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<sup>50</sup> The Congregation of the Sacred Stigmata (the Stigmatines Fathers) was founded by Gaspar Bertoni in Verona, Italy, in 1816. The Stigmatines are dedicated to the instruction of the Youth, the preaching of retreats and popular missions, and the assistance of clergy formation.

### 3.3.3 Comboni's African journeys

In total, Comboni undertook eight journeys to Africa. Exhaustive descriptions of the journeys can be found in the biography by Grancelli (1923), and in *Positio* I: 472-598. Here is a short summary:

1) September 1857 – September 1859 reaching the furthest place at S. Croce in the Sudan (*Positio* I:474-482).

2) December 1860 – March 1861 to Egypt reaching the Red Sea to redeem some slave boys (:483-491).

3) November 1865 – March 1866. Comboni travelled with Fr. Lodovico da Casoria in order to decide how to assign the various territories of the Vicariate of Central Africa<sup>51</sup> to the Franciscans and to the Mazza Institute. They reached Shellal in Upper Egypt (:491-531).

4) November 1867 – July 1868. Comboni together with three Camillian Fathers and three of St. Joseph of the Apparition reached Cairo. The purpose of this journey was to found the two Institutes for Africans in Cairo (:532-552).

5) February 1869 – March 1870. The aims of this journey were to consolidate the Institutes in Cairo and to begin preparations for a mission in Central Africa. The expedition comprised two missionaries formed in the Verona Institute, the Ursuline Faustina Stampais (his cousin), a sister and two African girls. In Cairo, Comboni opened another Institute with a school entrusted to African teachers under the direction of an Italian Sister (:552-556).

6) September 1872 – March 1876. From Cairo the expedition arrived at Khartoum and then visited El-Obeid, and went on to Delen, where Comboni organised a new mission station. It was his first journey to Africa after his nomination as Pro-vicar Apostolic of Central Africa. It was also the first time that religious Sisters were introduced into the interior of Africa (:556-571).

7) December 1877 – May 1879 reached Cairo and Khartoum. It was the first journey to Africa after his Episcopal ordination in July 1877. This expedition comprised

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<sup>51</sup> The Vicariate of Central Africa was established by Pope Gregory XVI on 3 April 1846. It covered a vast territory that included Egypt, Sudan, and a big part of the interior of Africa South of the Sahara desert. In this territory the Holy See intended to reach out the population and establish the Church. More details about the history of the Vicariate can be found in Schmid 1987:47-51.

three priests, six brothers and the first five *Pie Madri della Ngrizia* (Comboni Missionary Sisters) (:571-588).

**8) November 1800 – October 1881.** This last journey was meant to consolidate the vicariate and to expand the apostolic activities in the Nuba region (Sudan). The expedition comprised four priests, four brothers, six Sisters and a servant. In June 1881 he explored part of the Nuba Mountains in order to find a place for a new mission station (589-598). Comboni, tried earnestly to fight slavery in the Vicariate and in this last period he fought against slavery in the Nuba region (*Positio* II:770-773). He died in Khartoum on 19 October 1881, exhausted by fever.

### **3.3.4 Comboni's European journeys**

In-between his African journeys, Comboni often travelled around Europe trying to arouse interest in the mission work of the Church. A detailed report of these travels around Europe, documenting the mission activities and encounters with important people, is provided by *Positio* I:393-471. Here is a short summary:

**1) October 1864 – June 1865.** Cardinal Barnabò advised Comboni to make his Plan known to the mission associations, especially in France (To Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò 25.2.1865, in *Writings*:1022). Comboni also intended to verify the possibility of a collaboration with other institutes engaged in Africa (*Positio* I:394). He wanted all Catholics to work for Africa (To Fr. Goffredo Noecker 9.11.1864, in *Writings*:943). This was the real intention of his journey.

**2) October – November 1866,** to France, England, and Germany. The intention of this journey was to found a missionary institute. The Society of Cologne was supportive. Nevertheless, it would not support such an institute financially; according to its statutes, the society could only support the Institutes in Cairo, not the ones in Europe. Therefore, in June 1867, Comboni founded the association of the *Opera del Buon Pastore* (*Work of the Good Shepherd*) – the aims of which were to support financially the Institutes in Verona and to be a means of mission animation (*Positio* I:299-304, 413-414).

**3) July 1868 – January 1869.** The aim of this journey was to seek financial support for the Institutes in Cairo. Comboni also intended to spread the *Opera del Buon Pastore* at an international level. Moreover, he was exploring the possibility of founding

a seminary for Africa, which would be affiliated with the one in Verona. This project did not materialise (:417:419). On 26 July, Comboni went to Grenoble (France) and the sanctuary of La Salette, where he consecrated Africa to the Virgin Mary (Consecration of Africa to Notre Dame de La Salette, in *Writings*:1638-1644). Comboni declares:

as you were proclaimed by my venerable Pastor, the Bishop of Verona, as you were proclaimed by the Pontiff of your Immaculate Conception, you will always be the Queen of Africa, the Queen of the black people [Nigrizia] ... I ask you, turn these unfortunate sons of Canaan [sic] into sons of Abraham, to such an extent that from now on the Church may apply to them the praise the Holy Spirit paid to you: "I am black, but beautiful, my daughter of Jerusalem." Amen (:1644).

**4) December 1870 – October 1871.** In this period, Comboni was reorganising the Institute in Verona, and thus, he needed financial support for it and for the Institute in Cairo as well. Envisaging also a reawakening of mission in Central Africa, Comboni also intended to mobilise the Catholics of Europe for this aim. Therefore, he remained a few months in Vienna, where the abovementioned association *Marienverein* had its headquarters. By the beginning of March 1871, Comboni had already started distributing his *Programm der Regeneration des Negerlandes* (Program for the Regeneration of Africa), in Europe (*Positio* I:440-442) – a copy of which, he also enclosed in a letter to the Emperor Franz Josef (2.3.1871, in *Writings*:2409). The distribution of the leaflet with this program, aimed to animate the church for mission in Central Africa.

**5) October – November 1877.** After his episcopal ordination on 12 August 1877, Comboni undertook another short journey around Europe. He gave presentations at two conferences in Paris and Vienna (*Positio*:I:451-459).

In 1879 and 1880, Comboni undertook a few short journeys around Italy, before leaving for Africa for the last time (*Positio* I:459-462). He visited the emperor Franz Josef. Comboni mentions this visit in a letter to Cardinal Giovanni Simeoni (27.9.1880, in *Writings*:6084).

Before describing the charismatic experience of Comboni in Rome in 1864, it is worth mentioning that, he visited the Society of Cologne in Autumn 1863, where he got new ideas, that became essential to the formulation of his Plan (To Fr. Goffredo Noecker 9.1864, in *Writings*:909).

Comboni was a man on the move. He committed himself entirely to Africa and the Africans. All his journeys, either to Africa or around Europe, were intended to

promote mission in Central Africa. These journeys were in a certain way the fruit of his spirituality. It was the deep relationship with God that drove him to mission in Central Africa. I show this below. Comboni died in Khartoum on 10 October 1881, at the age of 50.

### 3.3.5 The charismatic experience in 1864

The Plan of Comboni, which I explain in this section, is considered by Comboni to be the fruit of an enlightenment that he received on 15 September 1864 at the tomb of St. Peter in the Vatican Basilica. He alludes to this fact in various writings. In the first manuscript, dated 18 September, he states that “a project [in Italian *disegno*] flashed into our mind” (The Plan, in *Writings*:810). On 20 October 1864, he writes to Fr. Mazza (in *Writings*:926): “I believe this plan is the work of God, because the thought of it burst upon me on 15 September while I was doing the triduum to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque.”<sup>52</sup> In the fourth edition of the Plan dated 1871, Comboni writes that “the Plan flashed before us” (in *Writings*:2754). In a report to A. Franchi, on 15 April 1876 (in *Writings*:4084), Comboni writes that “on 18 September 1864<sup>53</sup> having attended the beatification of Margaret Alacoque at St Peter’s in the Vatican, my *Plan for the Regeneration of Africa* flashed into mind.” On 16 July 1877, he writes to Msgr. Girolamo Verzeri (in *Writings*:4690) and speaks of “the suitability of my *Plan for the Regeneration of Africa*, which came to me in a flash on 18 September 1864.”

The historian Romanato (1998:227) does not consider the Plan to be a “sudden divine enlightenment.” In his view, Comboni described it as such, in order to get approval for it. It is true that in a report to the Society of Cologne, written on 9 November 1864 (in *Writings*:942), Comboni states:

as soon as I arrived in Rome and spoke of the new plan I had conceived in Cologne and developed in my mind on the journey between Cologne and Mainz, the Cardinal ordered me to put these ideas down in writing and in my plan to unite and make use of all those who are working for Africa.

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<sup>52</sup> A Triduum is a special three-day period of prayer, in preparation for an important feast.

<sup>53</sup> The chronology in his writings appears to be problematic. What is important, is not so much whether the date of the enlightenment was the 15 or 18 September. It is an experience prolonged in a specific time that cannot be defined with chronological precision. Rather, it has to be defined with a *kairotic* precision. The time of the Triduum was the right time for Comboni to make a synthesis of various elements (Baritusso 2000:76).

He also adds that “the Society of Cologne ... in a certain way ... gave birth to the idea of the new project, since it was after discussions with the Presidential Committee that I had the thought of the Plan” (:945). In 1876, in another report to the same Society (in *Writings*:4393), Comboni underlines that the “Plan [was] based on the thinking of the most illuminated minds I have known.”

Nevertheless, I maintain, together with others (González Fernandez 2003:85-87; Chiocchetta 1982:96, 101-102; Baritusso 2000:84-85), that the experience at St. Peter’s tomb was genuine. Certainly, Comboni built on various discussions and ideas from the Society of Cologne and other missionaries about the possible future of mission work in Central Africa, which at that point in time was suffering failure.<sup>54</sup> The plan to have young Africans studying in Europe revealed its deficiencies and Comboni, who also still supported it, gradually began to rethink it (Romanato 1998:226).

One can say that Comboni was unconsciously preparing himself for something new. In the first manuscript of the Plan, dated 18 September 1864 (in *Writings*:809), Comboni writes that “[t]he heart of every good and faithful Catholic, inflamed as it must be by the spirit of the love of Jesus Christ, will surely be deeply wounded and grievously disturbed by” the possibility that the mission activities in Central Africa might be stopped. Although Comboni here speaks in the third person, he is actually speaking out of his experience. He is not talking about some abstract ideas. He is *the* Catholic inflamed by the love of Jesus Christ.

Experiences of suffering and failure endured in the heart of Africa, along with all the valuable information, insights gained in the course of the numerous encounters and discussions with other missionaries, prepared Comboni for “the Spirit’s gift of understanding” (Chiocchetta 1982:92) and converged at that time of prayer at the tomb of St. Peter. God’s intervention gave clarity to the vague and fragmentary intuitions he had had up to that moment. Comboni’s experience on 15 September 1864 can be described as grace that made *the pieces of a puzzle fall into place*. From that moment his thoughts and ideas became clear and organised.

From the above discussion the conclusion can be drawn that the Plan of Comboni was rooted in a *mystical* experience, which was, as it were, the official seal on

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<sup>54</sup> Schmid (1987:291-200) describes the reasons for the failure of mission in Central Africa since the establishment in 1846 of the Vicariate of Central Africa. Romanato (1998: 124-145) describes the beginning and the later development of mission in Central Africa. He identifies the circumstances and the causes that determined its failure. At the end of 1862, the Vicariate of Central Africa was annexed to the Vicariate of Egypt. In fifteen years, the only tangible result was the death of approximately seventy missionaries (Romanato 1998:145).

Comboni's vocation. Until that moment he had been one of the members of Mazza Institute, an individual. From that moment on, he had been entrusted with a public mission. It was time for him "to assume the responsibility of announcing the Gospel to Africa; he had to found an Institute directed by its Rules to that end [he also had to found an Institute of Sisters for Africa]; to him fell the burden of recalling the world to its share of responsibility for that commitment" (Chiocchetta 1982:109).

### 3.3.6 The Plan for the regeneration of Africa

The great majority of the letters and reports Comboni wrote, refer, either implicitly or explicitly, to the *way* he intended to plant the Church in Central Africa once and for all, so that Africa herself might become Church, and the protagonist of her own regeneration. This *way* was already mentioned as the *Plan*, or the *new Project* that Comboni wrote on 18 September 1864 (Chiocchetta 1982:12).

#### 3.3.6.1 The first manuscript and various editions

The first manuscript<sup>55</sup> was followed by various editions and translations. The first printed Italian edition was issued in Turin in December 1864, with the title *Plan for the Regeneration of Africa proposed by Daniel Comboni of the Mazza Institute, Apostolic Missionary of Central Africa*.<sup>56</sup> The title of this edition already shows a development in thought. He no longer refers to a *new Project (disegno)* but a *Plan*, in which a "page discreetly reveals the inspiring enlightenment" (*Positio* I:179, my translation). The term *Plan* instead of *disegno* (Project) shows the fuller confidence and deeper conviction of the author about its content and the necessity of carrying it out. Comboni's name appears in the title, to express the acceptance of the responsibility for the Plan and its implementation (Chiocchetta 1982:44).

From this time on, he no longer utilised the term *conversion*, but spoke of *regeneration*. Mission activity, for Comboni, was not simply the rejection of "a past

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<sup>55</sup> Its title is: *Sunto del nuovo disegno della Società dei Sacri Cuori di Gesù e di Maria per la conversione della Nigrizia proposto alla S. Congregazione di Propaganda Fide da D. Daniele Comboni dell'Istituto Mazza (Summary of the new Project of the Association of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary for the Conversion of Africa proposed to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide by Father Daniel Comboni of the Mazza Institute)*. The full text is in *Writings*:800-846.

<sup>56</sup> The text of this edition is not reported in the *Writings* as it has just a few variations.

immersed for centuries in darkness and the shadow of death, or of a human situation bent below idolatrous practices and threatened by Islam” (Chiocchetta 1982:46).<sup>57</sup> Rather, it was a real renewal, a sort of rebirth, with the inclusion of *human development* at all levels in the evangelisation of Africans. For this reason, the term *regeneration* employed by Comboni expresses at best its potentiality and positivity (:46). The term *regeneration* prevents falling into two extremes: the rejection of what is already there, and the reduction of the mission activities to mere superficial changes (Pierli 1996:137). For Comboni, *regeneration* meant not only evangelising and Christianising the people of Africa, but, at the same time, providing them with the tools for upliftment at all levels. At a later stage, he writes that the regeneration of Africa by Africans themselves “meant marshalling efforts to the point that Africans would be able to lift themselves up from their deplorable situation [caused by slavery], both on religious and human levels” (Lozano 1989:40). A few years later, in the historical report on the Apostolic Vicariate of Central Africa (15.1.1870, in *Writings*:2179, my translation), Comboni underlines again the regeneration of Africa by Africa: “... lastly to soon enable Africa to regenerate herself.”

In his first Manuscript, Comboni used the term *Nigrizia*<sup>58</sup> while in the following editions he spoke of the regeneration of *Africa*. The aim of the Plan was, in fact, to evangelise the whole of Africa. In the first manuscript, Comboni (in *Writings*:813) states that

this *project* would, therefore, not restrict itself to the old-established borders of the mission of Central Africa ... but it would rather *include the whole African race*; it

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<sup>57</sup> The Vicariate of Central Africa was established in 1846 in order to hinder the expansion of Muslims – and Protestants – in the interior of Africa (Schmid 1987:48-58; Romanato 1998:73-75). Comboni realised that the competition between Christianity and Islam had started. He writes: “Human society, as we imagine it in the true sense of the word, cannot agree with the Koran; true progress, true civility and the Koran cannot coexist. The one destroys the other” (To the Society of Cologne 1877, in *Writings*:4941). Comboni did not have a high esteem of Islam. He gives a description of what, in his view, are the errors and superstitions of Islam (:4936-4951). Further not so positive descriptions about Islam can be found in *Writings* under the following numbers: 146, 6398, 4544-46, 4958. The negative opinion towards Muslims and followers of other faiths, changed in the Catholic Church with the Second Vatican Council. *Nostra Aetate* declares: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men” (NA 2). With *Nostra Aetate*, a new era of dialogue was opened.

<sup>58</sup> At this point, a few words have to be said about the term *Nigrizia*. There is an objective difficulty in finding an English equivalent for this word of which Comboni makes frequent use. Medieval cartographers used this word to indicate the land between the Sahara and the region of the Great Lakes. In fact, it stands for *Central Africa*. In the present research the term is translated with the word *Africa*.



would consequently extend and develop its activity over almost all the countries of black Africa (*italics in original*).

Comboni's various manuscripts and printed editions differ slightly, but their contents and structure are essentially identical. The plan consists of an introduction, that Chiocchetta (1982:72) calls "charismatic section;" an historical session, with the history of mission in Africa with its attempts and failures; and the consequent urgent need for proposing a new plan. The fundamental idea was to establish centres of operation "carefully situated at the least possible distance from the interior of the continent, in stable and fairly civilised areas, in which both Europeans and Africans could live and work" (The Plan 1864, in *Writings*:821). This implied the creation of safe centres with schools and universities for Africans (both men and women) along the coasts of Africa. The existing Vicariates, Prefectures, and Dioceses had to collaborate in a progressive action towards the centre of the continent (:820), according to "the principle of *the regeneration of Africa by Africa*" (To Fr. Francesco Bricolo 15.1.1865, in *Writings*:968).

The following section presents the pastoral program with the ways and means for the execution of the Plan. Comboni wanted to found Institutes of various kinds for both girls and boys. They would receive training in order to become craftsmen, teachers, nurses, doctors, catechists and priests. These educated Africans would then have penetrated the interior of the continent to collaborate with missionaries or to create autonomous Christian communities that would help their fellow Africans (:821-834). A few years later, Comboni wrote that lay people had to be prepared so that "they may become apostles of faith and civilisation in their own countries" (To the President of the Council of the Society of the Holy Childhood 31.7.1873, in *Writings*:3293).

A central committee would have fostered, organised, and coordinated all the activities. It would have also raised funds for the implementation of the Plan and would have founded institutes and seminaries for the African missions (:841). However, this committee was never established, owing to the fact that the Plan had been proposed by an individual, and, therefore, means and personnel were missing.

The Plan appeals for support and help from Catholics all over the world (843). This ecclesial perspective is considered a prelude to the *Postulatum* and to the Rules for the Institute, which he wrote in 1872 (Chiocchetta 1982:72; *Positio* I:181). The Plan

concludes with an appeal to Propaganda Fide and the Holy See for its approval (The Plan 1864, in *Writings*:844-846).

It is worth mentioning that in the Roman edition of the 1867 Plan, Comboni, on the insistence of Monsignor Castellacci, changed the name of the committee. It becomes the *Association of the Good Shepherd for the regeneration of Africa*. Comboni had called this committee the *Society of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary* (To Msgr. Luigi da Canossa 15.9.1867, in *Writings*:1433).<sup>59</sup> In this edition Comboni introduces the image of the Good Shepherd, and at the conclusion, he explains the mission implications that the figure of the Good Shepherd presents. He writes (in Chiocchetta 1982:57):

... in imitation of the Divine Shepherd, they [the missionaries] will lift the wretched little sheep up on to their shoulders, from among the thorns where they had become entangled and from the oppression into which they had been thrust, and they will lead them in triumph to the free and fertile pastures of the Catholic Church, repeating to the consolation of sheep and shepherd the sublime words of the Prince of the Apostles: *eratis enim sicut oves errantes, sed conversi estis ad Pastorem et Episcopum animarum vstrarum*<sup>60</sup> (1Pt 2:25).

By citing Peter, Comboni not only recalls his *papal* loyalty but also the “original freshness of the Christian vision of mission” (Chiocchetta 1982:57). From then on, Comboni associates the figure of the Good Shepherd, who gives his life for the sheep, with the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In a report to the Society of Cologne (15.2.1879, in *Writings*:5647), Comboni writes: “The Sacred Heart of Jesus also beats for the black peoples of Central Africa and Jesus Christ also died for the Africans. Central Africa too will be welcomed into the sheepfold by Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd.”

### 3.3.6.2 The originality of the Plan

As stated earlier, I consider the spiritual experience of Comboni at St. Peter’s Basilica authentic and foundational for his Plan. However, his Plan was also shaped and formed by his own mission experiences, thoughts and discussions he shared with the Pro-vicars Apostolic of Central Africa, Kirchner and Knoblecher,<sup>61</sup> Fr. Ludovico da

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<sup>59</sup> In this regard, cf. Chiocchetta 1982:56; Lozano 1989:92; González Fernández 2003:119.

<sup>60</sup> “For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.”

<sup>61</sup> Comboni, at the beginning of his Plan, copied a text of Knoblecher dated November 1850 (in *Positio* I:184): “Even today a mysterious darkness still covers those distant expanses which go to make up the

Casoria, Fr. Mazza, amongst others. He was also influenced by various contacts with the mission associations in Lyon, Paris, Cologne and Vienna (González Fernández 2003:94; *Positio* I:184-185).

The originality of Comboni's Plan consists in his wisdom and openness in being able to integrate both what he learnt from his own various experiences and the suggestions he received from others. I briefly summarise the characteristics of the originality of the Plan.

Comboni considered that with the establishment of centres in Africa, "where both Europeans Africans could live and work" (The Plan 1864, in *Writings*:821), an authentic spiritual dialogue between Christian Europe and Africa would become possible (*Positio* I:186). This dialogue was also possible because of the spiritual link between him and his friends and relatives in Europe. He often declares that "God [is] the centre of communication between us" (To his father 9.12.1857, in *Writings*:188).<sup>62</sup>

The Plan was intended for the whole of Africa (The Plan 1871, in *Writings*:2756), not just for a part of the continent. According to the historian Gray (1981:19), the "insistence that [the Plan] should embrace the whole Africa ... [was its] most original part."

For the implementation of the Plan, Comboni appealed to the whole Church, to all Catholics. Comboni puts it clearly: "The Work must be catholic, not just Spanish, French, German or Italian. All Catholics must help the poor Africans, because one nation alone would not succeed in succouring the whole African race" (To Fr. Goffredo Noecker 9.11.1864, in *Writings*:944). It was this ecclesial spirit that motivated Comboni in his mission animation activities all over Europe, and in his proposing the *Postulatum* to the First Vatican Council (*Positio* I:187).

It would be an oversimplification to consider the central idea of the *Regeneration of Africa by Africa* as the promotion of local clergy. Comboni was not the only promotor of a local clergy. Other missionaries were convinced of this necessity. Libermann (in Coulon & Brasseur 1988:558, my translation), for instance, maintained

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immensity of Black Africa ..." (The Plan 1864, in *Writings*:800; The Plan 1871, in *Writings*:2741). The use of this text from Knoblecher poses, according to Chiocchetta (1982:84 footnote \*), at least two questions: "how is it that Knoblecher's line of thought was taken up again when Comboni seemed to have discounted it? and from where did it derive its original influence in Comboni's writings?" (Chiocchetta 1982:84 footnote \*).

<sup>62</sup> Other examples in *Writings* under the numbers: 303, 667, 704, 721. From 1865, Comboni started to consider the Sacred Heart as centre of communication (To Marie Deluil Martiny 5.7.1865, in *Writings*:1149). Other examples under the numbers: 2323, 4764, 5869.

that “it is absolutely necessary to form local clergy to hope in the conversion of Africa.” The originality of Comboni’s Plan (and also of that of other associates of the mission movement) is to be found in the idea of “regenerating in Christ all the components of the African world of the Nigrizia” (*Positio* I:187).

In Comboni’s view, the Christian faith would bring great cultural and social transformation. Although he and other missionaries could not envisage a mission theology that was to be developed over a century later, the seed for the development of an African church with African features was sown. Comboni gives a hint of this in his *Postulatum* (24.6.1870, in *Writings*:2314; *Positio* I:187; González Fernandez 2003:97).

The extent to which Comboni holds the Africans in high esteem, is evidenced by his ambition to found four “theological-scientific universities ... in Africa” (The Plan 1871, in *Writings*:2782). These would form indigenous clergy and would “train them as able and enlightened leaders of the Christian communities of the interior of Africa” (:2782). It is clear that Comboni foresaw an African Church with her own hierarchy, and the seed sown by Comboni and other missionaries is still bearing fruit in Africa today.

Comboni was convinced of the importance of the combination of *faith and civilisation*. Science and reason were important. However, considering the number of failures in the geographical exploration of Africa and those in his own mission experience, he realised that all human endeavours must be open to the light of faith. In his view, only through “the impetus of that love set alight by the divine flame on Calvary” (The Plan 1871, in *Writings*:2742) could the regeneration of Africa be achieved (Valente da Cruz 2008:66). In a letter to the Emperor Franz Josef (2.3.1871, in *Writings*:2409), he puts it clearly: “the Plan for the Regeneration of Africa ... aims to *plant solidly the faith and civilisation* among these vast tribes.” Faith and civilisation have to go hand in hand.<sup>63</sup> At times, Comboni speaks of Christian, and other times, he speaks of European civilisation. There seems to be a common perception that civilisation is the European one. Europe, in fact, at that time, *represented the*

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<sup>63</sup> A few more citations from Comboni: “Africans will be raised not only to the heights of the Christian faith but also of European civilisation” (Report to the Society of Cologne 6.6.1871, in *Writings*:2524); Europe, in Comboni’s view had to “bring civilisation to the whole world” (:2570). Comboni repeats it several times in the Plan (1871, in *Writings*:2765, 2772, 2775, 2791). “It is impossible to bring true civilisation to Central Africa and to abolish slavery without preaching the Gospel and without the Catholic faith and apostolate: to obtain the true effect, every human effort is useless” (To Cardinal Franchi 15.1.1878, in *Writings*:5020).

*civilisation*. The rest of the world had still to receive it. Comboni was certainly a son of his time and recognised and considered Europe to be the centre of civilisation (The Plan 18.9.1864, in *Writings*:806). However, civilisation, for him, is something greater: “Jesus Christ ... is the only source of redemption and of life, the true source of civilisation and of the salvation of pagan peoples, the indestructible foundation of the true greatness and prosperity of the civilised nations of the world” (Historical Outline of the African Discoveries 1880, in *Writings*:6214). Valente da Cruz (2008:67) calls this “Christian optimism.” Christ, for Comboni, must always be at the centre – the hinge, as it were, on which the growth of people and society depend. Consequently, the Church is, in his eyes, not a political authority. Rather, she is a religious and moral authority, and therefore, has universal significance.

Comboni could not implement the Plan as he had hoped. It was certainly a great Plan but much more time was needed for its implementation. He died in Khartoum in 1881, at the age of 50. However, he succeeded in establishing the Institutes for Africans in Cairo, in founding two Institutes in Italy (one for priests and one for Sisters) for the preparation of missionaries for Africa. In his various travels through Europe, he animated the European Church to consider herself as a missionary church, and all the faithful were called to participate – in different ways – in the mission of Central Africa.

With regard to Comboni’s Plan, two more comments need mentioning. Toniolo and Hill (1974:19), despite being geographically and ethnologically focused, recognised the importance of the Plan. In their view, it provides “an early example of “indirect administration” in the missionary sphere; it is perhaps not an overstatement that its ideal inspired subsequent developments in the political administration of tropical Africa.”

Another interesting comment is provided by the historian Gray (1981:19) who considers the Plan as having “absolutely crucial significance: not primarily because of its direct influence on those who read it, but because it transformed Comboni himself.” Sure of the divine inspiration of the Plan, and the assurance of its importance, which he received from various persons and institutions (*Positio* I:205-221), including from Propaganda Fide and the Pope,<sup>64</sup> Comboni could “overcome immense difficulties in mobilising support in Europe for his vision of a new Africa” (Gray 1981:20). He spent his whole life and strength trying to achieve the implementation of the Plan. On 9 November 1864 in a report to Fr. Goffredo Noecker (in *Writings*:941), Comboni puts it

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<sup>64</sup> In the Post Scriptum of the first manuscript of the Plan (18.9.1864, in *Writings*:847), Comboni already acknowledges the encouragement of the Pope and of Propaganda Fide to carry out the Plan.

clearly: “Africa and the poor black people have taken possession of my heart. It lives for them alone.” His whole life’s purpose can be summarised in his motto *Africa or death*.<sup>65</sup> This expresses the value of his vocation.

### 3.3.7 The *Postulatum*

A few years after writing the Plan, Comboni presented the above mentioned *Postulatum* to the First Vatican Ecumenical Council. He was convinced that the work of regeneration of Africa was not his *private issue* and could not be achieved by a singular Institute, or by a single nation. All Catholics were called to engage in the regeneration of Africa (The Plan, 15.9.1864, in *Writings*:843).

After that Comboni constantly sought the collaboration of the Catholics of Europe, and the forthcoming Ecumenical Council of 1870 awakened in him the idea of the *Postulatum*. He recalls this event in a report to the Society of Cologne (6.6.1871, in *Writings*:2545) and describes it as an enlightenment:

Suddenly the thought flashed to my mind like lightning that I should make the most of the Holy Ecumenical Council. I should present myself to all the Bishops of the Catholic world, gathered around the tomb of St Peter to confer with the Vicar of Jesus Christ on the Catholic Church's most important concerns and on her influence over the whole world. I pondered for some time over this plan. Then I prayed and had prayers said for me by the first fruits of regenerated Africa.

One can detect a link between this text and the account of the experience Comboni had in St Peter’s Basilica, when his Plan became crystal clear to him. The difference lay in the fact that now Comboni was seeing the fruits of his dream. Africa was becoming church and the “first fruits of regenerated Africa” (:2545) were at hand and were “making their conscious contribution to an Ecumenical Council” (Chiocchetta 1982:123).

The above text also shows that Comboni underwent a time of discernment in prayer, and only:

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<sup>65</sup> In a letter to Msgr. Charles M. Lavigerie (22.11.1871, in *Writings*:2621), Comboni reveals the origin of his motto and writes: “In the General Congress at Mainz I said that my last word would always be: ‘Africa or death.’ More faithful and more loyal than Garibaldi, who shamefully retreated from Mentana after having proclaimed and said: ‘Rome or death,’ we shall know how to do our duty.” Once again Comboni adopts the ideas of others and adapts them for his purpose.

[a]fter consulting [his] colleagues on the mission at length and after a very mature examination, [he] resolved to leave for Rome ... Having thoroughly considered all that could most benefit [the] plan, after frequent conversations with the most distinguished Prelates of the Ecumenical Council and with Cardinal Barnabò in particular, [he] was invited to compile a *Postulatum Pro Nigris Africae Centralis*, containing the necessary qualities for it to be subsequently considered by the conciliar assembly (Report to the Society of Cologne 6.6.1871, in *Writings*:2545).

As in the case of the Plan, which I argued above, Comboni did not reach this conclusion without careful consideration. The idea of using the opportunity provided by the Council in favour of the regeneration of Africa was evident in various letters he wrote around this time.<sup>66</sup> Once again, Comboni shows his ability to synthesise all the information gathered during discussions with other missionaries about the future of mission in Africa, and compiles the *Postulatum* with the collaboration of Carcerieri, one of his missionaries (Chiocchetta 1982:127; *Positio* I:371).

The *Postulatum* is preceded by a circular letter to the Council Fathers (24.6.1870, in *Writings*:2294-2309), in which Comboni appeals to the missionary responsibility of the Church with regard to evangelisation in Africa. Thus, Comboni implores the Conciliar Fathers “to make the apostolic voice of the Sacred Vatican Council ring out; may it effectively champion the cause of the inhabitants of Central Africa...and timely ask for help from all the people of God to achieve the Africans’ regeneration” (:2305).

In this letter, Comboni cites biblical prophesies about the redemption of the Africans. He refers to the prophet Zephaniah (3:10) who cries that “from beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suppliants, my scattered ones, shall bring my offering.” He cites Psalm 71:8-9a,<sup>67</sup> and the Gospel according to John (10:16) “so there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

The *Postulatum* consists of a petition from the signatory Bishops<sup>68</sup> which was required in order that the Council may consider the situation of Africa. His endeavours to gain the support of the Bishops in this manner, reveals Comboni’s apostolic zeal. Central Africa was still abandoned, “without a Pastor, without Apostles, without Church and without Faith” (:2311). For this reason, the Vatican Council should “invite the

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<sup>66</sup> A few examples may suffice: (To Monsignor Luigi Canossa September 1869, in *Writings*:1980; to Bishop Luigi Canossa 15.2.1870, in *Writings*:2184; to Bishop Luigi Canossa 25.2.1870, in *Writings*:2194).

<sup>67</sup> “May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. May his foes bow down before him.”

<sup>68</sup> The signatory Bishops were only seventy. According to Beckman (in Chiocchetta 1982:134), this shows “the lack of interest in the missions ... [and] provides a picture of the difficult development of the missions in the nineteenth century.”

whole Catholic world to come to the aid of this cause [the regeneration of Africa]" (:2312).

The petition is followed by the reasons for the *Postulatum*. They point towards the theological idea of that time, that the curse of the descendants of Ham still affects African people. However, Comboni overcomes this opinion by stating that this curse has already been cancelled by the New Covenant and "the Vatican Ecumenical Council [should hasten] the fulfilment of this promise" (:2314).

The text concludes with the wish that African people may "shine like a dark pearl in the heavenly jewelled diadem of the ... Mother of God" (:2314). With this important sentence, Comboni envisages that "Africa might herself become Church" (Chiocchetta 1982:147). This was the goal that Comboni hoped to reach.

Due to the suspension of the Council,<sup>69</sup> the *Postulatum* could not be discussed by the Bishops. Nevertheless, it became, as did the letter to the Conciliar Fathers, which Comboni had translated into various languages, a good tool for mission animation. Some applied to join the work for the regeneration of Africa.<sup>70</sup> And so it was, that on 26 May 1872, Comboni was nominated Pro-vicar Apostolic of the Vicariate of Central Africa and the mission work in that area restarted (*Positio* I:376).

The main question that the *Postulatum* posed was simple. It was: Why is Africa not represented at the Council? Therefore, through the *Postulatum*, the apostolate and the mission dimension of the Church were to be awakened. (Chiocchetta 1982:143)

In short, it can be concluded, that Comboni was radically critical. Practically, he was telling "the Churches present at the Council [that they] had perhaps forgotten, had been perhaps distracted by other things, from the hour of grace which had given *them* life: that experience of redemption and unity which constituted their origin and their history" (Chiocchetta 1982:149).

Comboni, through the Plan and the *Postulatum*, had challenged the Church to become aware of the need for transformation. She had to recognise her true nature,

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<sup>69</sup> The Franco-Prussian (or Franco-German) war broke out on 19 July 1870. As the Germans advanced quickly and captured Emperor Napoleon III, France was no longer in a position to protect the Pope's rule in Rome. The French troops left Rome on 6-7 August. On 20 September, the *Piedmontese* troops breached through the *Porta Pia*, captured and annexed Rome into the newly formed Italian nation. This event also marked the end of the Papal States and their incorporation into the kingdom of Italy. One month later, on 20 October 1870, Pope Pius IX adjourned the council to a date to be fixed. The drafts about mission, discipline and pastoral care ended up into the archives (Chadwick 1998:212-221).

<sup>70</sup> "In the meantime the *Postulatum* is bearing good fruit, as we are receiving requests from good priests in many dioceses who want to devote themselves to the Work, and up to now we have accepted four of them" (To Msgr. Luigi Ciurcia 18.11.1870, in *Writings*:2337).



namely that she is missionary (Chiocchetta 1982:151). The Church, herself, only stated it officially one century later at the Second Vatican Council (cf. AG 2).

### 3.3.8 Founder

The Plan of Comboni (18.9.1964, in *Writings*:812), although “*one and simple* in its conception and application,” was very vast and required a great demand on resources. He had a Plan but no missionaries to implement it. As indicated above, Comboni was aware that the Plan was too big to be carried out by a single Institute or a single nation. He expected that (all) Catholics in Europe would commit themselves to work for the regeneration of Africa. He did not plan to found two religious institutes (Lozano 1989:121, 125; *Positio* I:244). Comboni intended “to found within the [Mazza] Institute a Seminary for the African missions to receive postulant priests from the whole Austrian Empire” (To Fr. Francesco Bricolo 7.1.1866, in *Writings*:1205). But, the Mazza Institute was not ready to assume such a commitment. Propaganda Fide, on its side, would not deal with an individual in such matters (*Positio* I:249). In this regard, Comboni recalls what Cardinal Barnabò (Propaganda Fide) told him on several occasions: “Either bring me a certificate that guarantees you will live for 35 years, or put the College in Verona on a firm footing: in either of these two cases I will give you a mission in Central Africa” (To Msgr. Luigi Ciurcia 18.11.1870, in *Writings*:2336).

On 1 June 1867, the Bishop of Verona founded a seminary for the formation of missionaries for Africa<sup>71</sup> and a school for girls to form missionary women (To Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò 11.6.1867, in *Writings*:1416). The institute for women did not materialise at that time. The *Institute for the Missions of Africa* was canonically established on 8 December 1871 (Lozano 1989:129; *Positio* I:247). It comprised diocesan priests and lay assistants, and maintained a diocesan structure until 1885, when, after the death of Comboni, it became a religious congregation (*Positio* I:254). Comboni also wrote the *Rules for the Institute for the Missions of Africa* (1871, in *Writings*:2640-2740), which I deal with below.

Comboni also founded the *Work of the Good Shepherd* on 1 June 1867. This was an association, which was meant to support the above seminary financially and

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<sup>71</sup> Comboni considered himself the founder of this “College in Verona for the African missions” (Report to the Society of Cologne 6.6.1871, in *Writings*:2477).

spiritually. Moreover, Comboni also intended it to be a means of international mission animation (*Positio* I:263-266, 302-304).

In December 1867, in collaboration with three Camillian Fathers and three Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Apparition, Comboni founded two Institutes in Cairo – one for girls and one for boys. In these Institutes young girls and boys were to receive religious and secular education. Another school for girls was opened the following year (*Positio* I:258).

Comboni was convinced of the importance of women in the work of regeneration of Africa. They were an integral part of the Plan (18.9.1867, in *Writings*:829, 833, 836). For instance, he stated that “the Catholic woman is all” (To Fr. Francesco Bricolo 15.1.1865, in *Writings*:970). Later he stated: “wherever the powerful action of Catholic women, unknown in those parts [of Central Africa], is introduced, we shall see great advantages in just a few years” (To Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò 6.2.1866, in *Writings*:1217). In a Report to the Society of Cologne (6.6.1871, in *Writings*:2472) Comboni writes: “the women Missionaries are a crucial and essential element in every respect.” Comboni approached numerous religious orders to request prayers and help in the implementation of his Plan.<sup>72</sup> For him, it was imperative that religious Sisters take part in his Plan. Comboni needed a proper congregation of women exclusively formed for the apostolate in Central Africa (Lozano 1989:145). Yet, before thinking of founding a religious congregation, he approached other congregations, like the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition, who actually collaborated with him in the Institute in Cairo and in the mission in Central Africa (*Positio* I:260). Comboni also hoped in the collaboration of the Canossian Sisters and spoke about it to Pius IX and to Cardinal Barnabò. In a letter to Msgr. Luigi da Canossa (21.11.1867, in *Writings*:1488) he writes: “I only recommend to you that the Canossian Sisters hurry up, because Barnabò would be really pleased to assign them to our work” (Pezzi 1981:37). However, this collaboration never materialised (:45).

Owing to a shortage of personnel, Comboni also negotiated with other religious congregations like the Good Shepherd Sisters (To Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò 6.2.1866, in *Writings*:1218; Lozano1989:145). When it became clear that the other

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<sup>72</sup> A few examples include: To Fr. Francesco Bricolo 15.1.1865, in *Writings*:973; To the Abbess Mary Michela Mueller, 8.12.1869, in *Writings*:1995-1998; To Msgr. Luigi di Canossa 10.12.1867, in *Writings*:1517; To Fr. Francesco Bricolo 15.1.1865, in *Writings*:972. The religious and secular institutes of women that Comboni mentions in his letters and reports number over forty. The list is given in *Writings*: pages 2210-2211.

religious institutes were not in a position to guarantee supplying Sisters for Africa, on a long-term basis, Comboni decided to found his own. So, it was, that on 1 January 1872, he founded the Institute of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* (*The Devout Mothers of the Africa*). Today they are called *Comboni Missionary Sisters*. More about them will be said in Chapter Four.

### **3.4 Comboni's mission spirituality**

I now present the mission spirituality that drove Comboni's life of mission, some characteristics of which have already emerged during the presentation of his life, the Plan and the *Postulatum*. In order to do so in a systematic way, I have chosen to first explore the Rules (1871) Comboni wrote for his missionaries. Every religious congregation lives by a Rule (or Constitutions), which encapsulates all the regulations which govern its members' way of life. It details every facet of daily life, especially their religious observance. As a founder would never prescribe for his community what he would not practise himself, it will become evident that these rules clearly reflect Comboni's own spirituality.

#### **3.4.1 The Rules of Comboni's Institute (1871)**

I have already recounted the charismatic experience of Comboni at the tomb of St. Peter and have come to the conclusion that the Plan did not simply come into being as a result of mission experience, inputs on African culture and discussions about the future of the mission in Central Africa, but, it was also the fruit of this charismatic gift. The core of this experience, and indeed, the charism he received and embodied, was a deeper realisation of the "death of the Son of God on the cross, contemplated as moment of the regeneration of the 'poorest and most abandoned'" (Valente da Cruz 2009:113). From the moment of that experience, he dedicated his whole life to the implementation of the Plan, and embarked on a mystical journey that led him "to understand more fully the meaning of a God who died on the cross for the salvation of souls" (Rules of the Institute for the Missions of Africa 1871, in *Writings*:2722). Just a few days before his death, he was able to declare: "I am happy in the *cross*, which,

when borne willingly out of love for God, gives birth to victory and eternal life” (To Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti 4.10.1881, in *Writings*:7246).

In 1867, a few years after the Plan was written and one year after the *Postulatum*, the Institute of Missions for Black Africa was founded, and it was canonically erected in 1871. By the end of that year, Comboni had written the Rules for the Institute, for his missionary Clerics and Coadjutor Brothers (1871 in *Writings*:2640-2740).<sup>73</sup> In a letter to Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò (27.12.1871, in *Writings*:2638), Comboni informed him that he “drafted [the Rules] after prolonged studies, authoritative consultations and considerable experience and knowledge of the arduous Work [he had] undertaken and is the object of [his] sleepless nights and deep sighs.” Comboni assured them that the matter was under “constant reflection ... [and] the utmost care.” In the foreword of the Rules (:2643), it is clearly stated: “They are the result of serious reflection, of long study, of careful consultation and of full knowledge of the situation in question.”

As a matter of fact, the Rules of 1871 were greatly inspired by the *Proposta di alcune Massime e Norme* of the PIME (Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions).<sup>74</sup> In a letter to Giuseppe Marinoni (3.2.1872, in *Writings*:2829), Comboni indicates that he had utilised the Rules of PIME “which have been immensely useful to me and I know almost by heart.” He made them his own, transcribed a great part of it and also inserted his own ideas, with clear references to the Plan and adaptations to the needs of the mission in Central Africa. (Lozano 1989:131; *Positio* I:319).

The parts inserted by Comboni in the Rules are provided by the *Positio* (I:323-324) as follows:

- The Rules for this missionary Institute “must be based on general principles” otherwise they “would become a heavy and unbearable burden for those bound to them” (1871 in *Writings*:2640).
- Comboni intended to form what he called “Apostles for Africa” (:2648). The regeneration of Africa is the aim of his Institute. For this reason the missionary had to be like “a stone hid under the earth, which will perhaps never come to light, but which will become part of the foundations of a vast,

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<sup>73</sup> These rules were intended also for the Sisters: “What I say about the male Institute is practised in the same way in the Institute of the *Devout Mothers of Africa*, whose novices are taught in the same spirit” (Report to Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò 2.3.1872, in *Writings*:2893).

<sup>74</sup> The PIME came into being in Saronno, Milan (Italy), as an institute that was meant to send diocesan priests on mission.

new building [the African Church] ...” (:2701). A lot of humility is therefore required of the missionaries.

- The decision for a total consecration to the regeneration of Africa was the prerequisite for someone joining the Institute. Only a person who was ready “to consecrate himself totally and until death to work for the regeneration of Africa” (:2659) was to be admitted in the Institute. Moreover, only one who “remains steadfast in his willingness to dedicate himself for life to serve the work of the Regeneration of Africa” (:2659) was considered a full member of the Institute. The Rules also state that whoever collaborates “in the Institute in the preparatory work in Europe aimed at training missionaries for Africa, is just as really consecrated to the regeneration of Africa” both those in Africa and those in Verona (:2655). “Missionary consecration is therefore considered as a perennial living in state of mission” (*Positio* I, Doc. X:324, my translation).
- The missionary consecration included the availability of the candidate “to consecrate himself totally and until death to work for the regeneration of Africa” (:2654). To this aim self-denial and abnegation had particular importance (Rules, in *Writings*:2645, 2711, 2722). Comboni knew from experience the difficulties of the mission endeavour in Central Africa at that time. He knew that the above attitudes and intentions were indispensable in order to face the challenges of mission. That is why the missionary needed “a heart burning with the pure love of God” (:2705) to overcome the hardships and privations he/she would encounter in Central Africa.
- To the religious practices already present in the *Proposta* of the PIME, Comboni added in his Rules “the monthly day of retreat ... the examinations of conscience, spiritual reading, the visit to the Blessed Sacrament and to the Blessed Virgin Mary” (:2707). This clearly shows that Comboni placed a great importance on the spiritual life of his missionaries (*Positio* I:345 footnote <sup>83</sup>).

I am well aware that many of the Rules were taken, or literally copied, from the *Proposta* of the PIME Comboni. Nevertheless, Comboni made these principles his own, and added what he considered necessary for the needs of his Institute. Therefore, it is not an overestimation to say that these Rules written for his missionary Clerics and Coadjutor Brothers are an expression of his own spiritual experience, especially Chapter X, which deals with the instruction for the development of the spirit and virtues of

students of the Institute. Comboni himself “speaks through the words of Chapter X of the Rules; here from the fullness of his heart he expresses his whole life” (Chiocchetta 1982:189).

I now present various aspects of Chapter X of the Rules, without specifying whether the example selected is taken from the *Proposta* of the PIME or not. Chapter X (Rules 1871, in *Writings*:2698) starts with asserting:

The life of a man, who has broken in an absolute and peremptory way all relations with the world and the things naturally most dear to him, must [be] a life of spirit and of faith. The missionary who lacks a strong *sense* of God and a lively interest in his glory and the good of souls is without the right attitude for his ministry, and will end by finding himself in a kind of emptiness and intolerable isolation (The word in italics is my translation, since the English translation rendered as ‘awareness’ does not do justice to the meaning of the Italian).

Comboni had already quoted the first part of this paragraph in a report to Cardinal Barnabò (4.1870, in *Writings*:2234). With these words, he sets the tone for presenting his understanding of the missionary life. The life of a missionary has to be of “spirit and faith,” otherwise he/she would not be able to continue in the missionary life. God is the centre of a missionary’s life. In fact, “the missionary to Africa works only for his God, for the most abandoned people in the world and for eternity. He is moved by the pure vision of his God” (:2702). The Rules continue by saying:

When the missionary in Africa has a heart burning with the pure love of God, *when with the gaze of faith he contemplates* the great goodness and sublimeness [sic] of the work for which he spends himself, then all the privations, the continuous hardships, the greatest trials become a paradise on earth for his heart; then the cruellest of martyrdoms and death itself become the dearest and most eagerly desired reward for his sacrifices (:2705, the words in italics are my translation since the English version does not do justice to the Italian).

The missionaries “must also become very familiar with the assiduous exercise of the practice of the presence of God so that it becomes all but second nature to them. They must also learn how to communicate with God in an intimate and childlike way” (2707). Moreover, the missionaries “will develop in themselves this most essential disposition by keeping their eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, loving him tenderly and seeking always to understand more fully the meaning of a God who died on the cross for the salvation of souls” (:2721).

The content of all these passages is couched in very contemplative language: pure love of God, exercise of the practice of the presence of God, intimate communication

with God, and to keep one's eyes fixed on Jesus Christ. For Comboni, "a habitual contemplative attitude is essential for the missionary" (Lozano 1989:103). He wanted his missionaries to be assiduous in contemplative prayer. It is a "habitual state of prayer" (:104), consisting of a way of being constantly present to God.

Comboni enjoyed a deep relationship with God and wanted the same for the members of his Institute.<sup>75</sup> As expressed in the Rules, it is clear that he intended that they should develop an on-going personal and intimate relationship with God, rather than engage in the practice of simple devotions. It is a personal and intimate encounter and relationship with God that is shown in the above mentioned words "keeping their eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, loving him tenderly."

The missionaries must also have "solid dispositions of genuine zeal, of pure love and the fear of God and that they should maintain a firm control over their passions ... there must also be a strong fervour for the things of the spirit, the study of the interior life and a lively desire for perfection" (Rules 1871 in *Writings*:2706). Here the need for integrating contemplation and action is clear. Comboni lived a contemplative life in action and wanted the same for his missionaries. "Keeping the eyes fixed on Jesus Christ and loving him tenderly" (:2721) necessarily means that the missionary gives his/her life completely to God and "works only for his God, for the most abandoned people in the world" (:2702).

Owing to circumstances that are not easy to reconstruct, the Rules that Comboni wrote by the end of 1871 could not be presented to Propaganda Fide. It seems that the Bishop of Verona, Canossa, wanted them to be reviewed. He might have considered it more appropriate to present to Propaganda Fide a shorter and more normative text (*Positio* I:316). Comboni, therefore, reworked them and in February 1872 presented the

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<sup>75</sup> To Cardinal Alessandro Franchi (20.7.1876, in *Writings*:4320), Comboni writes that "never do three hours pass without *my praying*, wherever I am." To Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti (12.2.1881), he writes that "it is a sin never to do one's meditation. In my past life, on rare occasions, I did not do it, but for a long time now I have always done it, even in the desert, not once have I missed it, ever, even when I was seriously ill" (:6474). A few weeks before his death, Comboni again invites others to pray: "Therefore pray and have faith; do not pray with words but with the fire of faith and charity. This is how the African Work was founded. This is how Religion and all the world's missions were founded" (To Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti 13.9.1881, in *Writings*:7063). Witnesses also speak of Comboni as a prayerful person. The servant, Giuseppe Khatib (in Baritusso 2004:65), who accompanied him for eight years on his African journeys testifies that Comboni often prayed with the Breviary and during that time did not want to be disturbed. Also Sr. Caterina Chincarini, one of his first Sisters, refers to the fact that Comboni was sleeping only a short time at night and even "to the scarce rest, he used to make time to stay with God...He was often seen during the night walking in the garden praying with the rosary in his hands" (in Baritusso 2004:65, my translation). The priest Francesco Morando de Rizzoni says of Comboni: "He was a man of great faith in God ... and [had] a great burning love for God ... Yes, he was really a man of prayer" (in Chiocchetta 1990:117).

edited Rules (in *Writings*:2799-2828) to Propaganda Fide. These Rules include an explicit reference to the formative methods of the *Society of Jesus* (the Jesuits) for the Novices. The text of 1872 comprises only three chapters. The juridical part is highlighted and the apostolic one, which was widely developed in the text of 1871, is drastically reduced (*Positio* I:317). Yet, in the report presented on 2 March 1872 to Cardinal Barnabò at Propaganda Fide (in *Writings*:2885-2893), Comboni recalls the mission spirituality developed in the Rules of 1871 that had to characterise the life of the missionaries. This makes clear that the text of 1871 was, for Comboni, “the most relevant and the most responsive one to the inspiration of the *Plan*” (*Positio* I:316, my translation). In 1872, Comboni was appointed as Pro-Vicar Apostolic of Central Africa and had to leave for Africa, and the issue of the Rules remained open. Owing to various circumstances and rewriting, eventually the Rules for the male Institute in Verona got their approval from the Holy See in 1895 (*Positio* I:325-326). An accurate historical re-enactment of the Rules is given by Chiocchetta (1982:155-176).

In the Rules of 1871, Comboni does not explicitly mention the devotion to the Sacred Heart. However, in his writings, Comboni shows a deep devotion to the Heart of Jesus. Indeed, his spirituality and way of life cannot be understood without referring to it. His Plan for the regeneration of Africa bears the title: *Summary of the new Project of the Association of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary* (in *Writings*:800-846), the simple fact that “The Institute is consecrated to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus...” (in *Writings*:2649), the Institute for missionaries in Cairo is consecrated to the Heart of Jesus (To Abbess Maria Michela Müller 3.7.1869, in *Writings*:1923), and when he becomes Pro-vicar Apostolic of Central Africa, he consecrates the vicariate to the Heart of Jesus (To Fr. Henri Ramière 10.10.1872, in *Writings*:3049; To Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò 28.8.1873, in *Writings*:3374; Pastoral Letter for the Consecration of the Vicariate to the Sacred Heart 1.8.1873, in *Writings*:3322-3330). He was also nominated Special Director of the Association of the Guard of Honour of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (To Marie Deluil Martiny 5.7.1865, in *Writings*:1148).

In the following section I focus on the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus which played a significant role in Comboni’s spiritual development.



### 3.4.2 The Sacred Heart of Jesus

Comboni learnt the devotion to the Sacred Heart in the Mazza Institute. In the chapel of his Institute there was a triptych, in the centre of which there were the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and of Mary (Lozano 1989:52). It is at the end of a letter to Fr. Nicola Mazza (28.11.1960, in *Writings*:476) that, for the first time, Comboni uses these words: “in the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary I declare myself ...” After that, the two Hearts come to be mentioned together more and more in his letters.

The Stigmatine Father, Giovanni Marani, also influenced Comboni’s spirituality through his teaching on confidence in God. Jesuit spirituality also marked his life with forms of structured piety, in public and private forms (De Giorgi 1998:205). Comboni tried to give these devotions a missionary dimension. For example, in a letter to Marie Deluil Martiny (5.7.1865, in *Writings*:1150), he intends to link up his Plan for the regeneration of Africa “closely with the Society of the Guard of Honour of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.” The members of the Society had “to propagate prayer for the conversion of Africa” and Comboni promised to “promote the Society of the Guard of Honour of the Sacred Heart, not only in Africa, but in the whole world.”

In a word, Comboni reflects the spiritual directions that mark the last part of the pontificate of Pius IX (1846-1878). This includes the beatification of Margaret Mary Alacoque, the approval of the devotion to the Sacred Heart, the devotion to St. Joseph, and the devotion towards the Papacy (De Giorgi 1998:20).

I will not go into details about specific practices regarding this devotion,<sup>76</sup> but will explain its origin and relevance for Comboni’s form of spirituality. I begin by recounting the experience of Margaret Mary Alacoque, a Visitation nun at Paray-le-Monial, France, as it was she who first spread this devotion. She received various mystical visions. The first one of the risen Christ on 27 December 1673 and the last one on the feast of *Corpus Christi* in 1675.<sup>77</sup> In her last vision she was instructed to let the Church institute a feast dedicated to the Sacred Heart, to be kept on the first Friday after the Octave of *Corpus Christi*. The feast was only instituted 70 years later (Oakes 2011:290-291). It was during the beatification ceremony of Margaret Mary Alacoque that Comboni had his charismatic experience, as mentioned earlier.

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<sup>76</sup> Details about the tradition of the devotion can be found in Lozano 1989:94-95.

<sup>77</sup> *Corpus Christi* is an important feast in the Catholic Church, which celebrates the Body of Christ (Eucharist).

One might well ask: “Why devotion to the Heart of Jesus?” The heart was considered to be “the core of the person, the central integrating and energising principle from which thought, feeling and action flow. To know the heart was thus to know the foundational truth of the person. To know the heart of Jesus was to become intimate with the ultimate mystery of God” (Wright 2000:188).

The side-wound – often expressed as the pierced Heart – became an object of devotion and the symbol of the intimate and loving relationship between God and creatures. The sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross was therefore understood as an expression of profound love. When praying to “the side-wound which was conceptualized as the entryway to the heart, [one] experienced Love itself” (:188). Rahner (1966:108) considers the word “Heart” to be a primary word (*Urwort*), that is, comprehensive, all-embracing, and unifying. In it “everything can be gathered together in one and ‘assimilated’” (:111). It is in the heart that the mystery of one’s soul opens to the mystery of God.

Comboni experienced the Heart in this way. His life was imbued with devotion to the Heart of Jesus but he underwent a transformation in regard to this devotion. With the charismatic experience on 15 September 1864, Comboni’s relationship to the Heart of Jesus passed from the *devotional* to the *theological* (and I add to the profoundly spiritual). In this new relationship, his devotion no longer entailed simply repeating prayers or formulas; nor was it about the desire to make reparation for the unjust suffering of the Son of God. Rather, it consisted in “making Christ’s sentiments one’s own and receiving his Heart within oneself in a kind of mystical infusion” (Pierli 1989:14).

In the first manuscript of the Plan of 1864 (in *Writings*:800-846), Comboni does not mention the pierced Heart of Jesus, but he speaks of “[t]he heart of every good and faithful Catholic, inflamed by the spirit of the love of Jesus Christ” (:809). Both in the Turin edition of 1864 as well as in the edition of 1871, it becomes even clearer that he is referring to the pierced Heart of Jesus, even though he does not mention it there either:

[The Catholic] was carried away under the impetus of that love set alight by the divine flame on Calvary hill, when it came forth *from the side of the Crucified One* to embrace the whole human family; he felt his heart beat faster, and a divine power seemed to drive him towards those unknown lands. There he would enclose in his arms in an embrace of peace and of love those unfortunate brothers [sic] of his, upon whom it seemed that the fearful curse of Canaan still bore down (The Plan 1871, in *Writings*:2742, italics mine).

Comboni would have known something about the life and revelations of Margaret Mary Alacoque as, especially in the days before her beatification, he read about her and also participated in the Triduum. In her revelations the flames were an important element. They represented the infinite love of Christ for humanity. All this might have influenced the writing of the above paragraph of the Plan (Lozano 1989:106).

The *divine flame* flowing from the Pierced One is infused in each Catholic – including Comboni himself – who therefore becomes united with the Pierced One, in His love. In this *mystical infusion* he felt urged to reach his African brothers and sisters, to give them the embrace of peace and love. Comboni was completely carried away by the experience of God's love. Yet, he was not stuck in a sterile and abstract spirituality. He translated this profound spiritual experience into everyday living – into the practical tool for implementing his Plan for the regeneration of Africa, to which he was fully committed.

In a letter to Marie Deluil Martiny (15.10.1868, in *Writings*:1733), Comboni indicates clearly that “the Heart of Jesus was wounded by the lance on the Cross when he was dead; and that this terrible thrust of the lance also pierced the Heart of our Mother Mary: this lance wound will also have an effect in Africa.” Comboni is convinced that the love of the Heart of Jesus is universal and reaches all peoples, and that Africa is therefore already redeemed by the love that flows from Jesus' Heart. Comboni makes it clear in the *Postulatum* (24.6.1870, in *Writings*:2314): “it has been decreed that the solemn blessing of the New Covenant was to cancel all the curses of the Old” and the whole Church, represented at the First Vatican Council, has to hasten “the fulfilment of this promise.” For Comboni, there is no doubt: “The Sacred Heart of Jesus also beat for the black peoples of Central Africa and Jesus Christ also died for the Africans. [For this reason] Central Africa too will be welcomed into the sheepfold by Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd” (Report to the Society of Cologne 15.2.1879, in *Writings*:5647). For this reason, Comboni, on 14 September 1873, consecrated the Vicariate of Central Africa to the Heart of Jesus.

Comboni's life and all his labours for the regeneration of Africa were inspired by the profound conviction that the Heart of Jesus beats for Africans as well. After the consecration of the Vicariate to the Heart of Jesus, Comboni expresses this conviction

with great zeal in many of his letters and reports.<sup>78</sup> The respect and esteem he had for Africans was revolutionary for his time. Earlier (3.2.4), I have indicated the issue of the curse of Ham that many in Europe and America had a very low esteem of Africans, considering them inferior or even without a soul.<sup>79</sup> Comboni, instead, recognised their dignity as persons and children of God.

Comboni did not write much about theological validations for the devotion to the Sacred Heart. He only wrote about it in the Pastoral letter for the Consecration of the Vicariate (1.8.1873 in *Writings*:3322-3330).

There, he speaks about the “Heart, made divine by the hypostatic union of the Word with the human nature in Jesus Christ” (:3323). Yet, he does not emphasise particularly the physical heart of Jesus. Rather, he speaks of a Heart “always free from sin and rich in every grace ... [that] beat with the purest and most merciful love for men [sic]” (:3323). Comboni, here, speaks about “the spiritual Heart (the *soul* of Jesus, particularly in its volitional and affective ability)” (Lozano 1989:122, my translation). He briefly describes how this pure and merciful love for humanity permeated the whole life of Jesus, from the manger to the sending of the Apostles. After this description, Comboni, summarises the various ways with which the Heart of Jesus was contemplated in history (Consecration of the Vicariate 1.8.1873 in *Writings*:3324-3325). At the end, he comes back to the core of his belief: from the Heart of Jesus “torrents of graces and rivers of heavenly blessings will flow upon this great people of Central Africa” (:3330).

From the moment of his consecration of the Vicariate, Comboni put his trust more and more in the Heart of Jesus. In a letter to Monsignor Joseph de Girardin (31.7.1873, in *Writings*:3318), he writes: “I placed all my trust in the Sacred Heart of Jesus.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Some more examples can be found in *Writings* under these numbers: 3136, 3412, 4085, 4290, 4596, 5055, 5437, 5581, 5670, 6080, 6381, 6447, 6496.

<sup>79</sup> Brasseur (1988:581-594) investigates the various interpretations of the word *Black* in encyclopaedias and dictionaries in the nineteenth century. Most of them are very negative and reflect the mentality of that time, including justifying slavery. Hegel, in his work *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* ([1837] 1975), portrays a very negative picture of Africa and of its peoples: in Africa “there is no subjectivity, but merely a series of subjects that destroy one another” (:176). Hegel considers all Africans as sorcerers (:179). “Africans are extremely prone to fanaticism” (:188). “The condition in which they live is incapable of any development or culture, and their present existence is the same as it has always been ... Anyone who wishes to study the most terrible manifestation of human nature will find them in Africa” (:190). Hegel concludes his lecture by writing: “We shall therefore leave Africa at this point, and it need not be mentioned again” (:190).

<sup>80</sup> Some more examples can be found in *Writings* under these numbers: 3752, 3834, 3972, 5182, 5216. Comboni also invites other to have trust in the Heart of Jesus (To Fr. Francesco Giulianelli 26.3.1881, in *Writings*:6597; To Fr. Fancesco Giulianelli 20.6.1880, in *Writings*:6606; To Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti 17.12.1880, in *Writings*:6172).

Comboni possessed a sure hope that through the Heart of Jesus the endeavour for the regeneration of Africa would have a positive outcome.

In the above mentioned passage of the Plan 1871, in *Writings*:2742), for the first and only time, mention of the Trinity occurs (Chiocchetta 1982:97; Baritusso 2000:166).

It is because of the “supernatural light” by which each Catholic judges things, that he *saw* his African brothers and sisters and realised that there was one “common Father in heaven.” From the pierced Heart of the Son, “the Crucified One,” flows the “divine flame,” the Holy Spirit “to embrace the whole human family.” This embrace for Africans and for all humanity is what we call *missio Dei*. The Catholic is infused with the “divine power ... towards those unknown lands. There he would enclose in his arms in an embrace of peace and of love those unfortunate brothers [sic] of his.” It is the call to participation in God’s mission.

Mission, for Comboni, therefore, flows from the wounded Heart of Jesus and is a response to the poverty, oppression, and weakness of the African people. For this reason Comboni uses the phrase “the most needy and abandoned in the world” (The Plan 1864, in *Writings*:809). The link between mission and the option for the poor is clearly set. Comboni’s (and the missionaries’) mission environment is constituted by spiritual, physical, and sociological needs; by the reality of (any form of) slavery, and by the lack of hope of many peoples (Pierli 1989:50). Consequently the aim of mission is to enable people to come to know and experience the love of God made available through the Heart of the Crucified One; to improve their general welfare; and to liberate them from all that prevents them from living in dignity.

Comboni experienced enormous difficulties, problems and opposition in attempting the implementation of his Plan. A few months before his premature death, he wrote to Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti (19.3.1881, in *Writings*:6582), expressing covertly his experience of and trust in the Heart of Jesus: “As an experienced missionary, because I have seen many things in the world, I know what I am doing, and I know something about the greatness *of the Heart* of Jesus, of Our Lady and of my dear Beppo [Joseph]” [italics missing in the English translation].

### 3.4.3 The Good Shepherd

I indicated earlier that the image of the Pierced Heart is associated with that of the Good Shepherd. In 1866, Comboni makes it very clear in a report to the Society of Cologne (in Chiocchetta & Gilli 1977:276; Pierli 1989:15): “I think that right now when many Christians are plotting against the Lord and his Christ, the Heart of the Divine Shepherd must lean with double love towards the vast, far and unknown lands, towards so many millions of lost sheep still living in the darkness of death.” We also find this connection in the Report of 1879 to the same Society (in *Writings*:5647).

The symbolism of the heart, and the image of the Good Shepherd, come together in the icon of the Heart of Christ. To Fr. Henri Ramière (10.10.1872, in *Writings*:3049), Comboni writes: “It is necessary that the Divine Heart of Jesus leads all these lost sheep back to the flock of salvation.” For Comboni, this notion was not simply an intellectual idea, but a solid conviction that he had held since 1867. He realised that his charismatic experience in 1864; the writing of the Plan; the *Postulatum*; and all the missionary efforts bring about the regeneration of Africa, practically, “came from the Heart of the Good Shepherd” (Pierli 1989:16).

Comboni’s life began to mirror that of the Good Shepherd, who gives his life for the sheep so that they may have life in abundance (Jn 10:10-11). He identified with the Good Shepherd and gave his life freely in total obedience to the will of God. The self-giving of Comboni was also a sharing of the *pierced Heart*, that is, of *kenosis* and annihilation, that for him, came through sickness, rejection, calumny, opposition, and even being forsaken by his own collaborators.

He experienced the universal love of God passing through the Heart of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and inflamed by the Holy Spirit he was sent to his African brothers and sisters who were, in his opinion, the poorest and most marginalised. For this reason, he was able to live the *kenosis* without ever giving up. He firmly believed that he was doing the will of God.

The climax of Comboni’s identification with the Good Shepherd is to be found in the homily he gave in Khartoum on 11 May 1873 (in *Writings*:3158-3159), as Pro-vicar of the vicariate of Central Africa.

I have returned among you never again to cease being yours and all consecrated for your greater good in eternity. Come day come night, come sun come rain, I shall always be equally ready to serve your spiritual needs: the rich and the poor, the

healthy and the sick, the young and the old, the masters and the servants will always have equal access to my heart. Your good will be mine and your sorrows will also be mine. I make common cause with each one of you, and the happiest day in my life will be the one on which I will be able to give my life for you.

Here, he does not actually mention the Good Shepherd, however, the expressions he uses are the ones of the Good Shepherd. Comboni expresses his total identification with the Good Shepherd, who is present with his universal love. Everyone has access to Comboni's heart. With this expression Comboni shows that through his heart – identified with the one of the Good Shepherd – everyone can also find access to the Good Shepherd, and to God.

At the same time, there is an identification with the people he is sent to, through the sharing of his life. Comboni reassures *his flock*: “Your good will be mine and your sorrows will also be mine.” All that the *flock* lives and experiences is taken up by the *shepherd*, in a total self-giving to the *flock*.

### 3.4.4 The Cross

As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, Mazza and Bertoni had instilled in Comboni a strong sense of sacrifice, with a sense of Christocentrism seen exclusively with reference to the Cross that is open to suffering for the sake of actions imbued with charity. Comboni's love for Africa followed later and became the locus where he realised his ideal for life and mission (Romanato 1998:199). Africa was the place of extreme suffering, both physical and spiritual. It was a place of solitude, a sense of despair, a fatal climate, diseases, and very difficult languages. Central Africa became, for Comboni, the land where Christianity was to be reborn. This rebirth was to happen only through suffering, just as Christ's salvation came through the cross (Romanato 1998:200). Comboni's conviction was clear: “The work of Redemption was born and developed among sorrows and thorns, and for this reason shows an admirable development and a comforting and happy future” (Report to the Society of Cologne 1877, in *Writings*:4974).

Comboni's missionary life was characterised by the presence of crosses (*Positio* I:264-265; *Positio* II:905).<sup>81</sup> Yet, he did not allow difficulty, calumny, opposition, and

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<sup>81</sup> Here follow a few examples of these crosses Comboni had to bear. The first journey to Africa turned out to be very hard. Death always lay in ambush. From Holy Cross station, he writes to Fr. Pietro

misunderstanding to destroy him. With a lucid spirit of discernment, he always tried to find a deeper meaning in things, which transcended human and historical dimension. In this meta-historical and spiritual discernment, he perceived divine Providence steering history and the Cross as the *conditio sine qua non* for the success of God's work (Valente da Cruz 2007:73-74). Comboni often referred to this in his correspondence and reports.<sup>82</sup> In a report to the Society of Cologne (6.6.1871, in *Writings*:2474) he states:

with the dispositions of his Providence, God has established that works that are to serve for his greater glory should be marked by the seal of the Cross, and since they are born at the foot of the Cross, they too, like God's Church in this world, must tolerate the harsh blows of persecution and hostility which hell plots against them.

In 1868, due to various circumstances, the nascent *Work of the Good Shepherd*, was suspended. At a later stage it was re-established (*Positio* I:264-265). Moreover, Comboni also had to face a problem with one of his missionaries (*Positio* I:258-259). In the forefront of these difficulties, Comboni welcomed the Cross as part of his life. In a letter to Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò (25.9.1868, in *Writings*:1710), he writes one of the most significant pages of his spirituality that can be defined as the *wedding* of the Cross. He writes: "I already see and understand that *the Cross* is such a friend to me that I have for some time chosen it as my eternal and inseparable Bride. So, the Cross will be my beloved *bride* and my wise and prudent teacher ..."

The report to the Society of Cologne on the Vicariate of Central Africa ends with a hymn to the cross (1877, in *Writings*:4973-4975). It summarises the spirituality of the cross that Comboni lived. The cross became the altar "of the whole world" (:4973). It continues:

The work of the Redemption was born and developed among sorrows and thorns, and for this reason shows an admirable development and a comforting and happy

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Grana (9.3.1858, in *Writings*:338) "We are prepared to die at any time ..." To his father he writes: "Our lives are in God's hands. Let him do with them what he wills: we have irrevocably sacrificed them to him" (20.11.1858, in *Writings*:434). In 1865, there were rumours that he had been expelled from Mazza Institute. He finds comfort in faith: "... faith is the only thing which gives me the strength to suffer for love for Christ" (To Fr. Francesco Bricolo 5.1.1865, in *Writings*:965). The foundation of the Institutes in Verona and Cairo were accompanied by various difficulties. Reflecting on the mystery of the Cross, Comboni almost formulated a doctrine (Chiocchetta & Gilli 1977:366): "The God-Man showed his wisdom in no better way than in making the Cross. The cross is the real comfort, the support, the light, the fortitude of just souls. It is the cross that forms great souls and makes them capable of undertaking and performing great things for the glory of God and the salvation of souls" (To Fr. Luigi Artini 28.8.1868, in *Writings*:1673).

<sup>82</sup> Other examples in this regard can be found in *Writings* under the following numbers: 1798, 2325, 3767, 4673, 4972, 5112, 5084, 5153, 5185, 5281, 5522, 5726, 6085, 6337.



future. The Cross has the power to change Central Africa into a land of blessings and salvation. The Cross releases a virtue that is gentle and does not kill, which renews and descends on souls like a restorative dew; the Cross releases a great force, because the Nazarene, lifted up on the tree of the Cross, extending one hand to the East and the other to the West, gathers his chosen ones into the bosom of the Church from all over the world, and with his pierced hands, like another Samson, shakes the pillars of the temple where for so many centuries the power of evil was worshipped. On these ruins he planted the marvellous Cross which has attracted all things: “Si exaltatus fuero a terra, omnia traham ad meipsum” [When I am raised from the earth, I will draw all things to myself] (:4974-4975).

Once again, Comboni stresses that through the suffering of the cross, salvation is brought to all humanity and therefore to Africa as well. It is interesting to notice that here Comboni does not mention the pierced Heart. Rather, he speaks of the “pierced hands” that destroy the power of evil. The hands, although pierced and annihilated, like the Heart, have the power to provide salvation. From the Cross, the Good Shepherd with his pierced hands, gathers all his sheep to himself.

He lived the spirituality of the cross in depth, with such an identification with it that, at the end of his life, he found himself on the same note as Paul. “... I am crucified, so pray that I may truly always have more and more love for the Cross and the thorns that will convert Africa,” writes Comboni to Fr. Francesco Giulianelli (27.9.1881, in *Writings*:7156).

A few days before his death, Comboni, overwhelmed by crosses, and accused of having a particular interest and feelings for a Sister (*Positio* II:895-896), once again declared that “God never abandons the one who trusts in him ... I am happy in the *cross*, which, when borne willingly out of love for God, gives birth to victory and eternal life” (To Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti 4.10.1881, in *Writings*:7246). These last words of Comboni reveal his deep faith and a tremendous fecundity, born of it. Indeed, through the Cross, life is generated in abundance.

Comboni did not only accept the crosses, he also asked for them: “Every day I ask the Lord ... for crosses, which are necessary in order firmly to implant God’s works and make them fruitful” (To Msgr. Luigi Ciurcia 18.11.1870, in *Writings*:2340).<sup>83</sup>

He was certainly not a masochist who wanted to suffer. His motivation in requesting crosses has to be found in the fact that, as stated above, the cross and

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<sup>83</sup> In other letters, Comboni asks for crosses: “Pray the divine Heart ... intentions ... that he grants me a great quantity of Crosses and thorns so that I can hardly breath, because no work of God can be founded without Crosses” (To Elisabetta Girelli 2.12.1870, in *Writings*:2374). Every day he asks for crosses (To Msgr. Luigi Curcia 2.8.1869, in *Writings*:1941; To Bishop Luigi di Canossa 2.1.1871, in *Writings*:2382).

suffering are the *conditio sine qua non* for salvation and eternal life. Therefore, in his view, they are both to be accepted and requested with faith.

### 3.4.5 Spirit of sacrifice

The spirit of sacrifice that characterised Comboni's spirituality has already emerged in this chapter. Like the cross, the spirit of sacrifice had permeated Comboni's life.

From the first awakening of his vocation to Africa, the spirit of sacrifice was present in his departure from his parents for Africa (To Fr. Pietro Grana 4.7.1857, in *Writings*:6-7), and he soon realised, through his experience, that the missionary life required a great spirit of sacrifice owing to the difficulties, the diseases, and the isolation. He himself was ready for everything: "I am prepared to sacrifice my life for the salvation of Africa" (To Marie Deluil Martiny, 5.7.1865, in *Writings*:1149). The aim of the regeneration of Africa never deterred or discouraged him in the face of problems and difficulties.

The spirit of sacrifice he lived had also to be lived by his missionaries. The condition Comboni set for a person to be part of his Institute was the readiness to consecrate oneself totally for the work for the regeneration of Africa (Rules 1871, in *Writings*:2654, 2659). The spirit of sacrifice can be endured only when the missionary "has a heart burning with the pure love of God ... then all the privations, the continuous hardships, the greatest trials become a paradise on earth for his heart" (:2705). Therefore, the missionaries, both male and female, have to be educated in this spirit of sacrifice (Report to Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò 2.3.1872, in *Writings*:2885). He or she "must be *a constant victim of sacrifice* destined to working, toiling and dying without perhaps ever seeing the fruit of his [or her] labours" (:2886).

It is of great significance that at the beginning of the Plan and at its end, Comboni indicated to what extent he and his missionaries have to live the spirit of sacrifice for the peoples of Africa and for their regeneration. He wrote that "we would be happy to pour out the last drop of our blood" (The Plan 18.9.1864, in *Writings*:809) and "we would be happy to dedicate our limited energies and our whole life to cooperate in the great work" (:844).

In the Rules of 1871 (in *Writings*:2702) and a few months later, in a Report to Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò (2.3.1872, in *Writings*:2890), Comboni indicated how the spirit of sacrifice had to be lived: “[c]ompletely emptied of self and deprived of every human comfort, the missionary to Africa works only for his God, for the most abandoned people in the world and for eternity.” The significance of this spirit of sacrifice, is perfectly summed up his motto “Africa or death.”

### **3.5 Comboni and the mission spirituality spiral**

Thus far, in this chapter, I have explored Comboni’s life and spirituality and how he was inspired for mission in Central Africa.

My purpose now is to see how the mission spirituality spiral can be utilised to interpret Comboni. I do it briefly, in order to avoid repetitions. But I first need to draw attention to a few points. Comboni did not know the mission spirituality spiral, and thus, lived its dimensions without having them conceptualised as I have done. It has also to be kept in mind that the spiral is a process, and therefore dynamic.

In applying the dimensions it is not necessary to follow the proposed sequence strictly. Thus, the dimensions can, at times, be used in a different order, or even simultaneously. Above all, it needs to be emphasised that spirituality is the core and the motor, or, as it were, the life force of the spiral, and is thus present throughout the process of the spiral, and contributing to enlivening the spiral itself.

#### **3.5.1 Spirituality**

It is clear from all the facts that I have presented that Comboni’s spirituality, understood as experience of and relationship with God, was for him the motor of mission. It is, from this encounter and relationship with God, that mission flows. In his Plan (1871, in *Writings*:2742) Comboni makes it explicit:

The Catholic ... carried away under the impetus of that love set alight by the divine flame on Calvary hill, when it came forth from the side of the Crucified One to embrace the whole human family ... felt his heart beat faster, and a divine power seemed to drive him towards those unknown lands. There he would enclose in his arms in an embrace of peace and of love those unfortunate brothers [sic] of his.

Comboni found in prayer, that is, in relationship with God, the spiritual strength that sustained him in his missionary life and prevented him to give up in the face of enormous difficulties. In a letter to Monsignor Luigi di Canossa (8.9.1869, in *Writings*:1969) he asserts: “The omnipotence of prayer is our strength.”

To summarise, I quote from Comboni’s letter to Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti (13.9.1881, in *Writings*:7063), which was written a few weeks before his death: “Therefore pray and have faith; do not pray with words but with the fire of faith and charity.” Comboni’s spirituality was rooted in prayer, that is, in a deep intimate relationship with God that generates a faith that sends believers out to make common cause with the poorest and most abandoned. As Pro-vicar, in his famous homily in Khartoum (11.5.1873, in *Writings*:3159) Comboni states: “I make common cause with each one of you, and the happiest day in my life will be the one on which I will be able to give my life for you.” Like him, his missionaries are called to “make common cause” with everyone, especially with the poorest and most abandoned ones.

### **3.5.2 Encounter with Africa and Africans**

Comboni’s encounter with Africa and Africans, as we have seen above, was moved by the Spirit: “The life of a missionary ... must be a life of spirit and of faith” (Report to Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò April 1870, in *Writings*:2234).

In order to encounter Africans, Comboni had to let go of possible prejudices and biases common in his time. This he did, as he considered the Africans as brothers and sisters, children of the same God and Father in heaven, “created in God’s image and likeness” (To Msgr. Giovanni Agnozzi 29.6.1877, in *Writings*:4641).

To enhance the encounter with Africans, he learnt the languages, the customs, and the beliefs of the peoples among whom he lived.<sup>84</sup> For Comboni, it was important in his contact with them, to “win their respect and their love” (To the Society of the Holy Childhood 3.5.1877, in *Writings*:4574). This attitude of respect and love was also a characteristic of Comboni (Baritusso 2004:52-53). For him, it was also crucial to use

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<sup>84</sup> There are countless references about this in his writings. I will mention only a few examples. In his first expedition to Africa, Comboni writes to his father saying that he needs to learn the language of the Dinka (5.3.1858, in *Writings*:294). “... I was able to become well acquainted with the language, the character and the customs of the numerous tribes of the African interior” (To Cardinal Alessandro Franchi 15.4.1876, in *Writings*:4084). Languages and customs were learnt and dictionaries were compiled. The historical report on the Vicariate (15.2.1870, in *Writings*:2027-2182) gives accurate information.

prudence in encountering the Africans, and so, he states that it is important to learn the language and make “friends with a few of its members, especially the chief ... Then ... the Missionary will not immediately start talking about Religion; he will build himself a house, and at the same time do what he can for the tribe’s good, treating the sick and teaching some crafts, etc.” (Report to Cardinal Alessandro Franchi 15.4.1876, in *Writings*:4131).

Other virtues relevant for mission encounters that Comboni practiced, and therefore, expected his missionaries to live as well, are: “*patience* which is an essential virtue for missionaries: and ... holy humility” (To Fr. Francesco Giulianelli 10.7.1880 in *Writings*:6022). In his first mission experience, Comboni grasped that “the practice of charity” (To Fr. Pietro Grana 9.3.1858 in *Writings*:339) is essential to really encounter others with respect for their human dignity.

The encounter with the Nubian African, Bakhit Caenda was just such an authentic mission encounter. It grew into “long years of true friendship and the close relationship” with him, that enabled Comboni to develop “a high esteem for the Nubas” (To Cardinal Alessandro Franchi 15.4.1876 in *Writings*:4098). In fact, Comboni’s special way of encounter with the Africans, brought about transformation – a transformation that not only changed him and the Africans, but a transformation that would affect the church at large.

The quality of encounter with the Africans, lived by Comboni, meets all the criteria for a genuine mission encounter, formulated in Chapter One (1.10.4) and Chapter Two (2.4.2.2).

### **3.5.3 Context analysis**

Comboni’s encounter with the context was no less deep than the encounter with the peoples of Africa. Comboni, in his first expedition to Africa, was young but not inexperienced. He knew that he had to cautiously analyse the context before saying anything about it: “I say nothing about the tribes where we are because I am waiting to have some experience of what this place is like” (To Dr. Bernardo Patuzzi 15.3.1858, in *Writings*:386). It takes time to analyse a context. In the Plan (15.9.1864 in *Writings*:804) he writes:

We researched their nature, customs and social conditions. We discovered, among other things, that besides the harsh climate which is the first obstacle to hinder the conversion of Africans, there is also the conspicuous lack of a living centre which would be able to give continuity to the work of the propagation of the faith in Central Africa.

Comboni's approach to the context is based on empirical evidence: "We have seen with our own eyes" (:807).

The analysis of the social conditions of Central Africa, allows Comboni to take a stance in the struggle against slavery. To the Duke of Acquaviva (23.9.1867, in *Writings*:1436) he writes:

Since I have travelled over a large part of Central Africa and the coasts where I thoroughly studied the African race, where I witnessed the abuse inflicted on humanity, and where I have not infrequently had a small part in obstructing the slave-trade, I hope ... [to] be able to give you some most interesting information about inland Africa and how to achieve the abolition of slavery and Africa's civilisation.

Experience and acquired knowledge of the context (social, political, and cultural aspects) enabled him to broaden his horizons and dare something new: "So the path so far followed must be abandoned, the old system must be changed and a *project* must be drawn up which will lead more effectively to the desired end [the regeneration of Africa]" (The Plan 15.9.1864 in *Writings*:809). Comboni, when already Bishop and Vicar Apostolic of Central Africa, speaks with full knowledge of the facts: "only after having thoroughly examined and observed the situation was I able to raise my voice" (to Canon Cristoforo Milone 24.10.1878, in *Writings*:5437).

### **3.5.4 Theological reflection**

In the discussion about Comboni's spirituality, it became clear that his spirituality was rooted in a deep relationship with God, which grew out of his encounter with God in Scripture. Though he knew the Church's interpretation of Scripture and Tradition, owing to his mission experience in Central Africa, he came to have a deeper and more personal interpretation. In fact, he recognised that the Africans were his brothers and sisters "who belonged to the same family as himself with one common Father in heaven" (The Plan 1871, in *Writings*:2742). Moreover, he was convinced that the "lance wound will also have an effect in Africa" (To Marie Deluil Martiny 15.10.1868, in

*Writings*:1733). He also alludes to this in his Pastoral Letter for the Consecration of the Vicariate to the Sacred Heart (1.8.1873, in *Writings*:3330).

Thus, it was, that he also prescribed the “frequent study of Holy Scripture” (To Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò 4.1870, in *Writings*:2235), as well as the History of the Church and other theological disciplines for his missionaries.

The text that inspired his spirituality of the Sacred Heart was John 19:34: “*One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out.*”

Comboni also associated the image of the Good Shepherd, as described in John’s Gospel (Chapter 10) with the Sacred Heart. He identified himself with the Good Shepherd, who is ready to give his life for His flock. He emphasises it especially in his homily in Khartoum (11.5.1873, in *Writings*:3158-3159), when he came back to the Sudan as Pro-Vicar.

Another key example, which I dealt with it earlier, is that of his overall interpretation of the curse of Ham. Whilst acknowledging it, he reckoned that it was, in fact, cancelled by the New Covenant.

### **3.5.5 Discernment for transformative ways of being in mission**

Context analysis and discernment for new ways of being in mission certainly go hand in hand. However, discernment, for Comboni, is a spiritual matter. So too, with regard to my spiral.

The first Mazza expedition to Africa, in 1857, turned out to be a failure, owing to the death of most of the participants. Comboni himself plagued by continuous fevers and sickness, was asked to return to Italy to recover. On that occasion, he did not get discouraged. Rather, he declared himself ready to “wait for new movements of God’s spirit, ever ready to sacrifice everything and overcome all in order to follow and fulfil the Lord’s will” (To Fr. Pietro Grana 30.7.1859, in *Writings*:464). This openness to the movements of the Spirit was a characteristic of Comboni. In all he did, he used to go through discernment. It was very evident when he was busy with the formulation of the Plan that he was listening and asking for opinions, input and confirmation from others. However, for Comboni, there was more to discernment than human confirmation. The real way of discernment was prayer. This is especially evident at all the key moments of

his life. Right from the beginning, when he considered trying his vocation to the Institute, he went through discernment and prayer (To Fr. Pietro Grana 13.8.1857, in *Writings*:13).

It was the charismatic experience of 1864, when he was absorbed in prayer that led him to write the Plan. The *Postulatum* to the Council Fathers was the result of careful consideration, but especially of prayer (Report to the Society of Cologne 6.6.1871, in *Writings*:2545). The Rules of the Institute (1871, in *Writings*:2643) “are the result of serious reflection, of long study, of careful consultation.” Every candidate who wishes to join the Institute also needs to go through a period of discernment and prayer (:2680-2681). Even the genuineness of practical and spiritual practices has to go through discernment (:2709). Comboni left nothing to chance: “every step, every action, everything concerning the Institutes was first thoroughly meditated on and reflected over by me, diligently consulted about and discussed and in the name of the Lord maturely resolved and decided by me” (Report to Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò, April 1870, in *Writings*:2224).

Before taking important decisions, Comboni used to pray and have people pray in order “to be able to ascertain the divine will” (Report to the Society of Cologne 6.6.1871, in *Writings*:2556). For him, prayer was essential in matters requiring discernment: “[h]aving pondered at length on all these circumstances ... [I] warmly implored the Lord to guide me in such important matters” (To Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò 15.10.1872, in *Writings*:3053).

When Comboni thought of moving some missionaries from Egypt to the interior of Africa, he “first pondered over every aspect of this and had also had it very thoroughly studied by others” (Report to the Society of Cologne 1877, in *Writings*:4816).

It cannot be disputed, that Comboni considered discernment essential – in fact it became a way of life. Thus, he was able to find transformative ways of being in mission.

### **3.5.6 Reflexivity**

Reflexivity was also part and parcel of Comboni’s life. He critically reflected on himself and on the situations, he was facing, and then evaluated them. Evaluation of the



work of evangelisation done by others and by himself was a constant in his life. Especially in the reports to Propaganda Fide (30.6.1866, in *Writings*:1281-1365) and the Society of Cologne (25.2.1872, in *Writings*:2868-2876), Comboni evaluated work done and determined the causes of failures of the first stage of the mission under Knoblecher. He names them clearly: the lack of a seminary for the formation of missionaries (:2868); the lack of a place for acclimatisation for the missionaries (:2869); the unsuitable way of life adopted by the German missionaries (:2870); the lack of indigenous clergy (:2871); and the lack of the feminine element in the mission (:2872). This enabled Comboni to make wise and informed judgements and thus to discern how to alter the path followed until then.

In 1872, Comboni informed the Propagation of the Faith in Lyon (1.4.1872, in *Writings*:2943), that the time was ripe to take a new step into the interior of Africa and argued as follows:

Having spent several years among the Africans of the White Nile, having travelled extensively in the African interior and at the same time having seriously studied the observation of all the greatest travellers in Central Africa from 1698 to today, I am convinced of the need to try and establish a mission in the interior near the Little Mountains, far away from the great basin of the White Nile.

Comboni learned that some of his ideas were inappropriate. In the beginning, he believed that faith and European civilisation were inseparable and the missionary had to take both to Central Africa. Later in a letter to the King of Belgium, Leopold II (30.6.1878, in *Writings*:5236), Comboni explains how he had to reconsider his opinion:

At one time I was very keen on having in Central Africa European doctors who had completed their studies and practised in European universities and hospitals. I also very much wanted to have pharmacies equipped with all types of European medicines and remedies. Today, I am rather less keen on these ideas.

Another example of his reflexivity is given in a letter to Msgr. De Girardin (3.3.1879, in *Writings*:5697): “Why create new needs for these peoples and make them give up their customs and those of these lands? I have acquired a fair amount of experience in this regard.” Comboni realised that his culture and the European civilisation were not unquestionable and absolute. He made these considerations at the ends of his life. And it was clear: his experience with the peoples of Africa changed his ideas and changed him. At this point it seems possible that if he had lived longer, he would have been open to reassessing his approach to Africa and its peoples.

### **3.6 Concluding comments**

By this short comparison of the characteristics of Comboni's mission spirituality and the dimensions of the mission spirituality spiral, it seems clear that Comboni actually lived all its dimensions. They were all evident, both in his way of life and in his mission activities, although he did not name them as I have done with my spiral.

It can, therefore, be concluded that this chapter shows that the mission spirituality spiral, used as an analytical tool, is helpful to study the mission spirituality of Comboni.

# Chapter Four

## Women for mission in Central Africa: The mission spirituality of the Comboni Missionary Sisters

### 4.1 Introduction

The absence of women in mission in Central Africa was one of the reasons why mission in that area did not succeed. Comboni realised it and made it clear in his Historical Report on the Vicariate Apostolic of Central Africa (5.2.1872, in *Writings*:2872). For this reason, after having explored Comboni's mission spirituality and having examined how he lived the dimensions of the mission spirituality spiral, I now turn my attention to the relevance of women for mission in Central Africa. Firstly, I focus briefly on the history of the religious congregation of the Comboni Missionary Sisters and the spirituality of the Sisters. I then proceed with the analysis of the documents of the Congregation (the Circular letters of the General Superiors, the Acts of various Chapters, and the Rule of Life), in an attempt to establish whether, and in what way, the dimensions of the mission spirituality spiral have been lived also by the Sisters, as Comboni himself did.

### 4.2 The relevance of the Catholic woman

In Chapter Three I mentioned the relevance of the Catholic woman in Comboni's eyes. "The Catholic woman is all," writes Comboni to Fr. Francesco Bricolo (15.1.1865, in *Writings*:970). So strong was his conviction, in this regard, that he tried by all means to involve women in mission, and, at the same time, he approached religious congregations of women in Europe to support and pray for mission in Central Africa. Thus, he broke with the tradition of excluding women and appreciated their apostolic ability. Comboni gave women a new role in the missionary outreach of

Church – something that had been neglected for centuries. He applied this new approach to both religious and lay women, single and married, Europeans and Africans.

#### 4.2.1 Women in mission

Comboni must have developed a great esteem for women at the Mazza Institute. The Mazza's Plan was intended to catechise and train African girls, who, in turn, would teach other girls in Africa, so as to prepare them to form Christian families, in time. This showed a great trust in the female potential to contribute to the development of Africa – a trust that made a deep impression upon the young Comboni.

He also reflected deeply upon the mission experience of his predecessors in Central Africa, and on his own mission experience. As a consequence, he realised that women have, by nature, the ability to collaborate in the regeneration of Africa because they are gifted with interpersonal skills. Women give birth to life and nurture it. Their characteristics, such as, their sensibility, compassion, tenderness, patience, courage, defence of human rights, hospitality, tenacity, and their openness to change could be mobilised for the regeneration of Africa (Coter 2004:104). In Comboni's view, the involvement of women in mission became an absolute necessity. In a letter to the Abbess, Mary Michela Mueller, (8.12.1869, in *Writings*:1996), he praises her because she understands well "... the missionary participation of the Catholic woman and true bride of Jesus Christ." In this way, she also becomes a "collaborator and a co-redeemer of the poor [sic] Africans."

A few years before his death, Comboni, in a letter to Mother Maria Annunziata Coseghi (2.7.1878, in *Writings*:5284), raises the question as to why his Institute in Verona, that is "the smallest and most insignificant of Institutes, microscopic ... [has] been able to consolidate the Apostolate of Central Africa and pitch its tents more successfully than my predecessors?" Among the reasons he gives, he proudly asserts that: "in the apostolate of Central Africa I was the first to involve the *omnipotent*<sup>85</sup> ministry of the woman of the Gospel and of the Sister of charity, who is the shield, strength and guarantee of the Missionary's ministry" (:5284, italics in original). By

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<sup>85</sup> Comboni uses this term to emphasise the paramount importance of the presence of the Sisters in the mission in Central Africa. It is an *omnipotent* ministry because the Sisters could visit, teach and catechise other women. The Sisters were in a position to reach out where the male missionary could not. In this sense their ministry is considered *omnipotent* by Comboni.

defining the ministry of the woman of the Gospel as *omnipotent*, Comboni, once again, does justice to all women, recognising their relevance in the Church, and especially in mission.

### 4.2.2 African women as protagonists of mission

In his Plan, Comboni assigned an important role to women both lay and religious, Africans and Europeans. First of all, African women had to become protagonists in the mission in Central Africa. For this reason, the Institutes in Africa had to have a group of young women, who would be

capable *school mistresses*, to whom will be given the most complete education possible in religion and Catholic morals, so that they may spread these principles and their practice in the degraded<sup>86</sup> African female society on which, as is the case among us, depends almost entirely the regeneration of the great family of Africans (The Plan 15.9.1964, in *Writings*:829).

Comboni established “a public school in Old Cairo, in which only black female teachers should work. [The school could] be attended by young girls of any race. I believed this would substantially increase esteem for the black race in Egypt”<sup>87</sup> (Report to the Society of Cologne, 6.6.1871, in *Writings*:2526). Comboni considered these black teachers as real evangelisers. In fact, they had to regard this opportunity of teaching in Cairo as a “period of trial, to train for their future apostolate as teachers and missionaries in Central Africa” (:2526). With this choice, he showed how much he esteemed African women. In 1868, he proudly writes to Msgr. Lavigerie (15.10.1868, in *Writings*:1728) declaring that in the Institute in Cairo he has “16 African women teachers who are trained in four languages and in all the feminine skills.”

## 4.3 Comboni’s option for missionary Sisters for Africa

Since the inception of his Plan, Comboni wanted religious Sisters to direct the female Institutes in Africa (The Plan 15.9.1864, in *Writings*:823). Religious Sisters “are indispensable in a distant and dangerous mission” (Historical Report on the Vicariate

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<sup>86</sup> It is worth mentioning that in the edition of 1871, Comboni does not include the word *degraded*.

<sup>87</sup> These black female teachers came from Central Africa and had studied in Europe. Biographical outlines of these teachers can be found in the report to the Cologne Association (1868, in *Writings*:1816-1840).

25.2.1872, in *Writings*:2872). Moreover, in their *omnipotent* ministry, they reach out to all:

[t]hey do not fear difficult and dangerous journeys ... they go into the houses of the infidels [sic], treat their wounds and invite them to the faith, they go into the law-courts, they go to the markets and shop thriftily for the mission, while others see to the schooling and the moral education of the girls, and they stand before the Pasha to defend the cause of the wretched with courage and skilful ways, they obtain respect from the Turks, the powerful, the soldiers and the Africans\*, and they work for the Church as much and sometimes more than the most zealous missionaries themselves (To Msgr. Girolamo Verzeri 10.3.1874, in *Writings*:3534, asterisk in original).<sup>88</sup>

Comboni considered the ministry of religious Sisters in Central Africa to be a real “priesthood” (To Mother Eufrasia Maraval 5.5.1878, in *Writings*: 5107). He writes:

The Sister of Charity in Central Africa does as much as three priests in Europe and this century of the persecution of the Catholic Church which has been deprived of the help of so many ecclesiastics and religious<sup>89</sup> is the century of Catholic women who are used by God's Providence as true priests, religious and apostles of the Church, auxiliaries of the Holy See, the arm of the Gospel ministry, pillars of the foreign apostolic Missions, civilisers of the primitive\* peoples (To Mother Emilie Julien, 30.3.1877, in *Writings*:4465, asterisk in original).

No wonder that Comboni tried by all means to involve religious Sisters in mission in Central Africa. The advantage of having religious Sisters in Muslim countries, was that they were the only ones who “can penetrate the secrets of the harems and communicate with the women who play such an important part in the lives and direction of the men ... Sisters are more necessary than missionaries and are the guarantee of the mission itself” (To Canon Cristoforo Milone 24.10.1878, in *Writings*:5442). Comboni realised that the presence of religious Sisters in Central Africa was of paramount importance because, additionally, in areas where people did not wear clothes, the Sisters were the only ones who could approach women, teach and catechise them, whilst the male missionaries had to take care of the poor. Religious Sisters, therefore, guaranteed that evangelisation of women in Central Africa could take place.

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<sup>88</sup> The presence of an asterisk in the *Writings* indicates that either there is an orthographic correction or a correction due to linguistic terms that would not be understandable today.

<sup>89</sup> Comboni refers here to the situation in Europe at that time. Secularisation and anticlericalism affected the Church and especially the religious orders, which were “regarded as useless and even dangerous to the triumph of a secular and democratic society” (Canu 1960:122). Comboni, in the same letter to Mother Emilie Julien (30.3.1877, in *Writings*:4465), writes: “The revolution that suppressed the religious Orders in Italy, which has forced all the young men, even priests, to be soldiers, has not done such great harm in Central Africa as it has in Europe and on other Missions.”

Comboni wanted the Sisters to take particular care of the women, to teach and catechise them (To the Society of the Holy Childhood 3.5.1877, in *Writings*:4523; To Canon Cristoforo Milone 24.10.1878, in *Writings*:5442) and to empower them to become themselves “teachers and indigenous female missionaries” (Historical Report on the Vicariate 25.2.1872, in *Writings*:2872).

### 4.3.1 *Women of the Gospel*

Religious Sisters are, for Comboni, “true images of the ancient women of the Gospel” (To the Director of *African Letters* 10.4.1874, in *Writings*:3553), who give their lives and do not count the cost. They “respond with their own force, with miraculous weakness and their very lives to that Heart which *ignem venit mittere in terram* [came to bring fire to the earth]” (:3553). The Comboni Missionary Sisters see themselves as these women of the Gospel, who followed Jesus up to the cross without giving up hope. They emphasise this identification with the women of the Gospel in their Rule of Life (RoL 1, footnote 4).

The image of *the women of the Gospel* has always been present on the journey of the Congregation; but it was Adele Brambilla, General Superior from 1998 to 2010, who gave it a deeper significance. In a circular letter (29.6.2002 Prot. 282/02),<sup>90</sup> Brambilla urges the Sisters to be like these women of the Gospel, who follow Jesus, who assist and serve him, who are touched by him and get healed, and who stay with him up to the cross. Faced with the tragedy of Calvary, they do not leave him, they stay, and then they come back to the tomb. They seek, they want to see, and they contemplate. For her it is clear:

It seems that the discipleship and the service lead the women right here to the contemplation of the Paschal mystery. This is a journey that other women, in the footsteps of Mary Magdalen, are called to continue along the centuries: **to stay, contemplate ... in order, then to announce** (bold in original).

Mary Magdalene and the other women were disciples of Jesus. They followed him, they stayed with him, and at the tomb they still looked for him. The risen Lord asks Mary: “For whom are you looking?” (Jn 20:15). In the contemplation of the

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<sup>90</sup> The circular letters of Brambilla are cited with the date and the Protocol number, as they appear in the current archives of the Comboni Missionary Sisters.

Paschal mystery, Mary (each of the other women) becomes apostle; she is now sent to announce: “I have seen the Lord” (Jn 20:18). Only through discipleship and contemplation does one become missionary. The path traced by Comboni for his missionaries is the same: “If they contemplate and appreciate a mystery of such great love with a living faith, they will consider themselves blessed to be able to offer themselves ...” (The Rules 1871, in *Writings*:2722).

The Acts of the Chapter of 2004 bear the title *Women of the Gospel for the mission ad gentes today*, and articulate the specificity of their charism as women of the Gospel, consecrated to God for mission *ad gentes* (CA 2004:2). Thus, it was decided to start “a systematic and contextualized reflection on our being women of the Gospel, consecrated to God for mission *ad gentes* today” (:51), focusing on consecrated life; the integration of consecration and mission; the call to radicality and prophecy; and community life. More about it will be said later in the chapter.

### **4.3.2 Characteristics of the missionary Sister according to Comboni**

In the Rules of 1871, Comboni indicated the characteristics that his missionaries, both men and women, needed to possess in order to be part of the Institute. These have already been explored in Chapter Three (3.4.1). Here, I only mention some with regard to the Sisters. This first part of Chapter Four is more descriptive of the Sisters’ characteristics, of their history and of the evolvment of their spirituality. The link to the dimensions of the mission spirituality spiral will follow (4.5).

#### **4.3.2.1 Spirit of sacrifice**

For Comboni, a the spirit of sacrifice was essential for missionaries, to the point that towards the end of his life, he, writing to Cardinal Canossa (3.3.1879, in *Writings*:5683), declares: “The missionaries and Sisters of Central Africa must be lambs for the slaughter,<sup>91</sup> people destined for great suffering for Jesus Christ. They must not

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<sup>91</sup> Comboni insists that the Sisters must be formed to the disposition of becoming “lambs for the slaughter.” He repeats it in various letters: To Msgr. Jean François de Garets 19.6.1879, in *Writings*:5734; To Msgr. Giacomo Scurati 16.7.1879, in *Writings*:5739; To Fr. Alessandro Businello 16.7.1879, in *Writings*:5746).



be anything else, because otherwise they would not be apostles but clowns, and good for nothing.” Missionary life, at that time, was fraught with dangers and the Sisters had to be ready for anything.

At this point, it is fitting to introduce Sr. Teresa Grigolini. She was one of the first five *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* (*Devout Mothers of Africa*) who left for Africa with Comboni on 12 December 1877. Comboni held her in high esteem and expected great things of her. In a letter to Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti 20.4.1881, in *Writings*:6653), he defines her as

the *prime and most* complete and perfect example in the Congregation of the Devout Mothers of Africa ... with her outstanding mind, capacities, charity and piety; with the qualities of a Daughter of St Vincent de Paul, she combines the sublime interior life of a Sacramentine and of a Daughter of the Visitation.

Sr. Teresa was, for Comboni, the kind of Sister that he wanted for mission in Central Africa. He wrote: “This is the type I mean” (:6654). Besides recognising her abilities, Comboni saw in her a quality that made of her “the strongest pillar of Central Africa ... she is a soul who belongs totally to God” (To Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti 6.9.1881, in *Writings*:7040).

This total dedication to God enabled her to overcome the suffering and the tragedy of the Mahdist revolution.<sup>92</sup> Together with seven other Sisters, she was a prisoner of the Mahdi. Her imprisonment lasted almost 16 years.<sup>93</sup> On 7.2.1882, before the imprisonment by the Mahdists, Sr. Teresa Grigolini wrote to Giulianelli (APMR VI/G/1/3): “I am glad to remain in Sudan, happy to offer the sacrifice of my life, already given to the Lord since the day of my profession.” Certainly, Sr. Teresa did not imagine what this sacrifice would involve. She did not imagine that she would have to enter into a false marriage with a Greek (like the Sisters who were imprisoned), in order to survive in the Mahdist camp. She also did not imagine that after the escape of some of them,

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<sup>92</sup> Between the end of June and beginning of July 1881, Muhammad Ahmad sent a letter to the sheikhs naming himself *Mahdi*, the messianic redeemer of the Islamic faith, and proclaiming the *mahdiyya*, a movement of Islamic religious reform. Eight Sisters and some Fathers were captured and for years remained prisoners of the Mahdi. During the imprisonment the Sisters were tortured, in order to make them abjure and pronounce the Muslim formula and become Muslims. In 1884 Fr. Bonomi, advised by Rodolfo Slatin, proposes to some Greeks, also prisoners of the Mahdi, that in order to protect the Sisters, they enter into false marriages, treating them as Sisters even though they would stay with them under the same roof (Vidale 2011:81-82). The Mahdist revolution ended on 3 September 1898. Exhaustive information about the Sisters and their experience as prisoners of the Mahdi can be found in Vidale 2000; 2005; 2011; Pezzi 1987:279:294.

<sup>93</sup> For detailed information about her life and imprisonment, cf. Vidale (2000); Corte Imperial 2013:198-226).

she, and other Sisters, would undergo further suffering and torture and be required to abjure their Christian faith. Sr. Teresa (in Vidale 2011:79) writes: “The formula was wrested at a moment when we were exhausted and out of our senses and half deaf from beating and hunger.” She did not imagine that, at the end, she had to totally sacrifice her life and vocation and agree to marry the Greek, Coccorempas. The sacrifice that Sr. Teresa had to accept was a total *kenosis*, like the one of Jesus on the cross. It was a sacrifice that Sr. Teresa could make willingly because she belonged totally to God. The Vicar Apostolic, Roveggio,<sup>94</sup> encountered Teresa after her liberation. In a letter to Maria Bollezzoli, the General Superior,<sup>95</sup> (18.10.1898 in APMR VI/B/3/2, my translation), he affirms that “before God, she [Grigolini] will receive great merits for this new and unheard of sacrifice.”

She, and the other Sisters, who had to suffer at the hands of the Mahdi, went through an experience of Gethsemane. They experienced solitude, fear of being abandoned by all, and even the silence of God. They had to undergo betrayal and physical and psychological suffering, but during this martyrdom, they displayed great spiritual strength. Through their martyrdom, the new, and still small Congregation acquired solid evangelical roots (Gasparini 2014:126-128). It was ready to grow as Comboni (To Msgr. Luigi di Canossa 4.10.1867, in *Writings*:1453) prophesised:

The mustard seed has been sown: and it has to sprout among troubles and thorns. It will grow among the buffering [sic] and the waves of persecution; but it will always produce abundant fruit in the field of the Church, because the divine farmer will safeguard it and cover it with the shield of his protection.

The dream of Comboni to *save Africa by Africa* included the readiness of his missionaries for sacrifice and martyrdom. When in the Rules of 1871 (in *Writings*:2705) he writes: “the cruellest of martyrdoms and death itself become the dearest and most eagerly desired reward for his sacrifices,” he could certainly not have imagined what his Sisters and priests would suffer during the years of imprisonment in the Mahdi camp. Yet, this slow and cruel martyrdom became “a seed that will produce some fruit ... for his [and her] successors in the mission” (Comboni to Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò 2.3.1872, in *Writings*:2889). For Comboni, it was clear: spirit of sacrifice and readiness for martyrdom were not an end in itself. The fruits they would produce were conversion, evangelisation and regeneration of Africa.

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<sup>94</sup> Roveggio was nominated Vicar Apostolic of Central Africa in 1895.

<sup>95</sup> Maria Bollezzoli was General Superior from 1871 to 1901.

#### 4.3.2.2 *Holy and capable*

Comboni wanted holy Sisters for the mission. In a letter to Mother Emilie Julien (19.3.1873, in *Writings*:3148), he writes: “Give me some holy Sisters like the three I have with me. Give me some real Sisters like the ones in the Cairo hospital, because a great spirit of sacrifice is required for this mission ...” Good and holy Sisters, ready for great sacrifices are needed for mission in Central Africa. A few months before his death, Comboni summarised the identity of the missionaries, both men and women in two words. They must be trained to be both

*holy and capable*. Saintliness without capability or capability without saintliness are of very little value to a person who wants to undertake a missionary career ... So in the first place *holiness*, completely free from sin [sic] and offence against God and humble. But this is not enough: *love* too is necessary to make these men and women do good work (To Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti 20.4.1881, in *Writings*:6655).

Comboni did not want his missionaries to have a piety too sweet to be true, and a bigoted faith. Rather he wanted “missionaries and Sisters ... who are *truly holy*, without false piety [in Italian: *non col collo storto*], because in Africa one needs ... bold and generous souls who know how to suffer and die for Christ and for the Africans” (To Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti 12.2.1881, in *Writings*:6486, italics in original). In the same letter he writes: “But for goodness sake, take few servants, and accept many educated women (it does not matter if they are older than 26), but, as you said to me in your last letter, serious women, good and with a critical sense ... in brief, true women!!!” (:6456). It is clear that Comboni wanted the Sisters to be mature – to be their own persons, and of sound faith, and able to make wise decisions in difficult situations.

Holiness is, thus, not simply a moral quality. Rather, it is a life led by the Spirit, who is Holy by definition. In this way, the Sisters “must be fired with love which has its source in God, and with the love of Christ” (:6656). Capability, which is linked to holiness, includes maturity, flexibility, the ability to engage in interpersonal relationships without fear and complexes, and the ability to serve the people according to their needs (Pierli & Ratti 1998:173). These two qualities, holiness and capability, are of paramount importance for mission also today. In fact, only a person who is led by the Spirit and lives in union with God; who is able to relate freely and with respect to others; who is able to discern the will of God for oneself and who is able to discern the good for others, can also bring about transformation in society.

### 4.3.2.3 *Cenacle of Apostles*

Another requirement for the missionaries and the Sisters is that they constitute a “cenacle of Apostles.” Comboni clearly expresses this in the Rules of 1871 (in *Writings*: 2648):

This Institute, then, becomes like a little Cenacle of Apostles for Africa, a centre of light sending to the centre of Africa as many rays as are the missionaries who go out from it. These rays of light, bringing warmth as well as illumination, cannot but reveal the nature of the Centre from which they spread out.

Comboni refers here to a concrete place – the Upper Room where the disciples of Jesus received the final instructions about their future ministry. Here, Jesus appeared to them after his resurrection (Lk 24:36-49; Jn 20:19-23) and, it is here, they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4). It is a place of formation and sending. So too, in this Cenacle, that is, in the community, missionaries (men and women) are to contemplate the love of God by “keeping their eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, loving him tenderly ...” (Rules of 1871, in *Writings*:2721) and it is from this Cenacle that they are sent to continue the work of the apostles. However, this Cenacle has limitations. It is a *little Cenacle*, made up of a heterogeneous group of people with their own shortcomings and weaknesses. In the Cenacle each member, and also time, brings changes, challenges and opportunities. This Cenacle is therefore not a *social group*. Rather, it has a theological and spiritual source (Pierli 1996:90). It is worth mentioning that Comboni, on his first journey to Africa, first visited the Holy Land. In a letter to his parents (12.10.1857, in *Writings*:27-85), he gives an accurate description of the holy places, which had a profound spiritual impact on him. After the description of the building in Jerusalem identified by tradition as the original Cenacle (and a few other sites) he writes: “The feelings aroused in me on seeing those sacred places ... God alone and those who visit Jerusalem can understand” (:60). The memory of this spiritual experience at the Cenacle may have contributed to Comboni thinking of his Institute as a “new” (To Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò, 26.11.1871, in *Writings*: 2622) and a “little” (Rules of 1871, in *Writings*:2648) Cenacle of Apostles.

#### 4.3.2.4 Discernment

Discernment is another important quality. In the Preface to the Rules of 1871 (in *Writings*:2640), Comboni indicates that the Rules for the missionaries (both men and women) “must be based on general principles” and that “those general principles must so inform his [or her] mind and heart that he [or she] is able to make decisions for himself [or herself], by applying them intelligently and with discretion to the times, the places and the most varied circumstances in which his [or her] calling may place him [or her]” (:2641). The missionaries (both men and women) must, therefore, be able to discern what is essential in their missionary life. Here, Comboni seems “to reflect the principles of Ignatius of Loyola on the discernment of spirits and therefore trust in persons. Comboni wanted that his missionaries could make their own decisions, following the Ignatian way” (Converset 2013:82, my translation). As indicated in Chapter Three (3.4.1), Comboni wanted his missionaries to be trained by means of the formative method of the Jesuits which undoubtedly included the training on discernment. It is important to highlight the relevance of discernment for the missionaries because it is one of the dimensions in the mission spirituality spiral.

### 4.4 The *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* (Devout Mothers of Nigrizia – Comboni Missionary Sisters)

#### 4.4.1 Foundation

From 1867 to 1879, the French Institute of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition<sup>96</sup> collaborated with Comboni, by sending Sisters for the mission in Central Africa. However, at a later stage – whilst the Sisters working there remained until 1879 – the Institute decided not to send any more Sisters. Comboni in a long letter to Mother Emilie Julien – Superior General of that Institute – (30.3.1877, in *Writings*: 4467-4478), reminds her of her decision. As a consequence, he decided to found his own Institute of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* (:4468).

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<sup>96</sup> For more detail about this Institute and the collaboration with Comboni, cf. *Positio* I:850-853; Comboni to the Society of Cologne 1868, in *Writings*:1796-1815; To Mother Emilie Julien 30.3.1877, in *Writings*:4464-4478; To Leo XIII 28.6.1878, in *Writings*:5213-5217.

Already in 1867, Comboni tried to establish an institute for Sisters (To Cardinal Barnabò 11.6.1867, in *Writings*:1416), but failed. Pezzi (1981:19-36) explains the reasons for this failure. This attempt was not considered to be the actual year of foundation of the Institute, although Comboni (in Pezzi 1981:49), referring to the establishment of the Institute in 1872, describes it as the *reformation* and not as the foundation of the Institute.

The Superior Council of the *Work of the Good Shepherd*<sup>97</sup> (in Vidale 2012:38) at a meeting on 21 November 1871, decided to establish a male seminary in Verona close to the Episcopal seminary, in order to train missionaries, and also to buy a house in Montorio (4 kilometres from Verona) to establish an institute to train female missionaries. The actual foundation of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* (today called Comboni Missionary Sisters) is, therefore, considered to be in Montorio on 1 January 1872. At that time there was one postulant. The official approval for the foundation was only given, by the Bishop of Verona, on 12 January 1872 (Grancelli 1923:219; Vidale 2012:45-46). On 14 September of the same year, the Institute was transferred from Montorio to Verona, where Comboni had bought the monastery of Santa Maria in Organo Street. At that stage, there were three postulants (Grancelli 1923:220; Vidale 2012:48-54).

At that time, the main concern was to find a suitable superior for the Institute. Comboni made every effort to find someone, who would comply with the aim of the Institute. Vidale (2012:55-67), recounts the story of this search from the beginning until the time that Maria Bollezzoli entered the Institute on 6 September 1874, and became its superior.

It is worthwhile mentioning that, a few years after the foundation of the Institute, Comboni considered amalgamating the Institute of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* with that of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition. In a letter to Cardinal Alessandro Franchi (21.8.1875, in *Writings*:3892), he writes that he “would be prepared to merge this Institute [of the *Pie Madri*] (about which Msgr. Canossa has just given me excellent news) with that of the Sisters of St Joseph, also with a view to avoiding any conflicts that might occur through human weakness between two Institutes of Sisters working in a single mission.” When the time came for a decision on the possible merger of the two Institutes, to be taken, Comboni underwent a period of discernment. He “consulted Fr.

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<sup>97</sup> Details about the *Work of the Good Shepherd* appear in Chapter Three (3.3.8).

Pasquale and Fr. Paolo, [his] Secretary, after examining the ten reasons for it and the seven against it” (To Mother Emilie Julien 30.3.1877, in *Writings*: 4470). It is surprising that, despite the ten reasons for the merger and the seven against it, Comboni “decided not to make any innovations for the present” (:4472). Thus he set aside the idea of the merger of the two Institutes. Pezzi (1981:120) attributes this choice to the desire for quality rather than quantity. The other reasons for this choice might have lain in the hope that the Institute of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* would grow, and also in the fact that the specific aim of the Institute was mission in Central Africa, which was not the aim of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition.

#### 4.4.2 The Rules for the Institute

The Rules, which Comboni wrote in 1871, were intended for the male members of his Institute and also for the Sisters (Report to Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò 2.3.1872, in *Writings*:2893). With regard to the training of his first postulants, he wanted to prepare them to develop a strong sense of God, to live a life of deep faith, and to be ready for martyrdom. It is astonishing that when Fr. Squaranti, the rector of the male Institute, encouraged by the Bishop Canossa of Verona, started to write the Rules for the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*, he did not even refer to Comboni’s Rules of 1871.<sup>98</sup> In fact, the first Rules that Fr. Antonio Squaranti wrote, consisted of a manuscript dated 8 December 1874 and were taken from a French institute (probably the Sisters of St Joseph of the Apparition) (Pezzi 1981:97; Chiocchetta 1982:18; *Positio* I:361). Comboni accepted these Rules in the present circumstances, but he came to realise that these Rules were not appropriate for the formation of his Sisters, who were destined for mission in Central Africa (Pezzi 1981:115). Thus, he wanted new Rules to be written, which took his long African experience in account. In a letter to Cardinal Giovanni Simeoni (26.5.1879, in *Writings*:5725) he writes:

Therefore, I hope it will not be long before the Constitutions and Rules of the above-mentioned Institute [*Pie Madri della Nigrizia*] can be presented to the Holy See for approval, once their precise execution and adequacy has been tried and tested in Central Africa.

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<sup>98</sup> The reason why Fr. Squaranti wrote the Rules for the Sisters, was because Comboni, being in Africa at the time, was unable to do so himself.

Comboni insisted that new rules for the Sisters and the Fathers be written (To Fr. Sembianti 17.12.1880, in *Writings*:6174). A few months before his death, he wrote again to Fr. Sembianti (12.2.1881, in *Writings*:6472) begging him to write the rules for both Institutes in Verona, and to send them to him. Comboni wrote: "... at a quick glance I see the modifications to be made, *attenta experientia Africana*." It was essential that his experience of Africa be taken into consideration in the compilation of the rules for the missionary Institute. As already mentioned, his African experience was not considered in the first Rules, which revealed a dichotomy between the religious life as it was required by the rules, and the apostolic life that the Sisters had to live in Africa.

Yet, despite all the initial difficulties, such as, the search for a good superior, the interference of the Rector of the male Institute,<sup>99</sup> the quasi-monastic rigidity of the first Rules (Pezzi 1987:97-104), and the Mahdist revolution, the Institute of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* survived and grew. Comboni instilled in the Sisters the ideal of martyrdom:

Among the details the Holy Father asked me about the institutions of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* in Verona, I had the pleasure to mention the joy these future spiritual Mothers of Central Africa felt in their hearts when I wrote to their Superior from Khartoum, with the order to inculcate in the novices that they are destined to be *lambs for the slaughter, who must lead a life among hardships privations* and in the burning heat, and must subject themselves to a slow martyrdom *for love of Christ and to save those souls who are the neediest and most abandoned in the world* (To Msgr. Giacomo Scurati 16.7.1879, in *Writings*:5739, italics in original).

The seed planted by Comboni in these "future spiritual Mothers of Central Africa," who wanted to consecrate their lives to mission in Central Africa, was coming from God, and therefore, it bore fruit.

The premature death of Comboni, in 1881, raised worrying questions about the future of the Institute. The first General Superior, Maria Bollezzoli, is described by Comboni (To Cardinal Giovanni Simeoni 24.9.1881, in *Writings*:7102) as "a woman of piety, of principle, who is shy, most humble and very unsure of herself, with excessive respect for her immediate Superiors." But it is exactly she, who showed the ability to follow in the footsteps of Comboni. At the time of his death, in a circular letter to the Sisters, she writes:

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<sup>99</sup> The Institute was under the jurisdiction of the male Institute (Rules 1874, in *Positio* I:366). In an anonymous letter dated 18 July 1874 (in *Positio* I:296-297) to Cardinal Barnabò, it is requested from Propaganda Fide, that the approval of the female Institute may have precise norms, that avoid excessive interference by the missionaries of the male Institute.



Be strong and generous. Do not become disheartened. Do not go astray, but remain steadfast and intrepid. Remain at the place given to you by Divine Providence. Do not turn back, but walk firmly in the footsteps traced by your magnanimous Father. Hear how he shouts to you from the top of the mountain, where he has now arrived: Forge ahead! Forge ahead! ... (Bollezzoli 25.11.1895, in *Donne per la missione*:18).<sup>100</sup>

Bollezzoli was among the first Sisters who pronounced their first vows in the hands of Comboni on 15 October 1876 (Grancelli 1923:292; Vidale 2012:78). The Sisters renewed their vows every year.<sup>101</sup> It was only in 1897 that the Institute received Papal approval. From that time, the Sisters were allowed to take perpetual vows. Of course, they had to receive the General Superior's approval to do so. The first perpetual professions took place on 8 December 1897, the feast of the Immaculate Conception.<sup>102</sup>

Bollezzoli had to overcome a great number of difficulties. Yet, the Institute was growing and on 15 December 1877, the first five *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* left with Comboni for Africa (*Positio* I:571-588). The Institute had to wait until 1895 for its rules to be completed and they were approved for a period of five years by Propaganda Fide in February 1897. The Rules received the final approval in 1912 and these were later revised.

On 10.10.1895, Bollezzoli sent the Rules to all the Sisters together with a letter, in which she writes: "Our small Congregation begins now a way of leading itself that it should have followed since the beginning ..." (10.10.1895, in *Donne per la missione*:21). Now the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* could start their journey without interference from the male Institute. In the same letter, Bollezzoli acknowledges that, as Comboni did in 1880, the Institute had always had Rules but they "were incomplete and insufficient for the need of the Congregation" (:22).<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> The circular letters of the General Superiors from 1881 to 1980 are reported in the book: *Donne per la missione*. All the citations and quotations from this book will indicate the surname of the Superior General, the date of the circular letter, the title of the book and the page number. As the book is in Italian, all the quotations from it are my translations.

<sup>101</sup> Comboni wanted it so. In a letter to Mother Emilie Julien (30.3.1877, in *Writings*:4473) he writes: "My Sisters pronounce vows for one year, which are then renewed annually. On the other hand, I do not want to have this Institute approved by Rome until it has experienced at least 10 years of Mission in Central Africa."

<sup>102</sup> The dogma of the Immaculate Conception was established in the Catholic Church by Pope Pius IX in 1854. It declares that the Blessed Virgin Mary was conceived free from original sin. Comboni had a special devotion to the Virgin Mary. He consecrated Africa to her (26.7.1868, in *Writings*:1638-1644). The Institute of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* that is "consecrated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, is put under the protection of Mary Immaculate ..." (Rules 1874, in *Positio* I:363; RoL 11).

<sup>103</sup> For more information about the history of the Rules of 1895 cf. Pezzi 1987:346-35; Vidale 2013:170-173, 178-181, 197-202.

The Institute of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*, which received the definitive approval by Propaganda Fide in 1906, slowly grew in numbers and expanded its presence in other countries. Today, there are 163 communities in 36 countries on 4 continents (CA 2016:2.6).

#### **4.4.3 *Save Africa by Africa* – Sr. Fortunata Quascè**

Comboni's dream was *the regeneration of Africa by Africa*. Africans had to be protagonists of their own regeneration and evangelisation. The first fruit of this dream in the Congregation of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* was Fortunata Quascè. Born in the Nuba region (Sudan), she was sold as a slave in Cairo when she was still a child. She was ransomed by Fr. Geremia da Livorno and taken to Verona in 1853, where she was educated at the Mazza Institute and became fluent in Italian, French, and Arabic. In 1867, she left Italy with Comboni for Cairo, where she taught catechism to the girls, who were her compatriots.

Comboni (To Msgr. de Girardin 7.8.1869, in *Writings*:1955) makes the aim of the Institute in Cairo clear, saying that, at that time it “consists of three Sisters and 17 African teachers. Its aim is to train good female teachers for the education and apostolate of African women in Central Africa.” Fortunata was one of these *apostles*. In 1873, she left Cairo with Comboni for El Obeid and there with Faustina Stampais (Comboni's cousin) and Domitilla Bakita (from the Denka tribe), she started a girls school. At that time, they were all lay persons.

In 1879, Fortunata and Domitilla asked to enter the Congregation of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*. On 2 October 1880, Fortunata entered the noviciate at El Obeid, and on Easter day, in 1882, she pronounced her first vows (Vidale 2012:93). Years before, Comboni, in a letter to Mother Emilie Julien (23.12.1869, in *Writings*:2010), writes: “We need an indigenous teacher who is a Sister.” Now, in Fortunata Quascè, Comboni's dream *to save Africa by Africa*, was materialising. She was the first of a long line of African Sisters, who would become missionaries both in Africa and on other continents.

## 4.4.4 Toward a feminine Combonian spirituality

### 4.4.4.1 Introduction

As mentioned, the *Pie Madre della Nigrizia* are today called the Comboni Missionary Sisters. They have tried to live the mission spirituality of Comboni since the foundation of their congregation. Yet, it is only in the Acts of the Chapter of 1970<sup>104</sup> that, for the first time, an official document of the Congregation speaks of “Combonian Spirituality” (CA 1970:65-81). This spirituality entails a life of spirit and faith. It is an intense spiritual life, which is based on personal prayer (dialogue with Christ, in other words: encounter with Christ) that has to be assessed for its genuineness through discernment (:66-68). Humility and obedience to the will of God are essential (:69-70). “The Comboni Missionary Sister, a true contemplative in action, sees God in her most needy brothers [sic] ...” (:71). ). She is called to live a life of mortification (:72–74) in a spirit of love and sacrifice (:75-81). The Acts go on to define the fundamental requirements for the Comboni Sisters, which are: to be willing to dedicate herself to the evangelisation of Africa, and to choose to live the missionary charism in religious life and in the Congregation (:83). From the above, it is evident that a great effort was made to analyse and understand the charism. However, a specific spirituality based on the charism had not yet emerged. The kind of spirituality indicated was still simply focusing on *doing* (Fusato 2003:43).

In the 1980s, studies on Comboni and his writings, conducted by the male congregation, revealed that there was a differentiation between Comboni’s spirituality and Comboni or Combonian Spirituality – the latter referring to the spirituality that has developed in the Congregations (both male and female) (Fusato 2003:45). Pierli<sup>105</sup> spoke of the above differentiation and also recognised the “need [of the Congregations] for a definite spirituality to preserve ‘the being’ from which ‘the doing’ flows, linked to missionary service as the soul is to the body” (1989:93). In fact, he realised that greater

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<sup>104</sup> The special General Chapter took place in 1970 after the Second Vatican Council. It was part of the *aggiornamento* (the bringing up to date, the renewal) that the Church and the Second Vatican Council requested of religious Congregations. The Congregations were requested to return to the *primigenia inspiratio* (original inspiration). For the Comboni Missionary Sisters this meant returning to the writings of Comboni, his Plan, and the Rules of 1871 (CA 1970:62).

<sup>105</sup> Pierli is a Comboni missionary. He wrote several books on Comboni’s spirituality and on the spirituality of the Comboni missionaries (1989; 1992; 1996; Pierli & Ratti 1998).

importance was given to *doing* than to *being*. It might be for this reason, that the thirst for contemplation became more important in the female Congregation. This will be dealt with in more detail later in this chapter.

#### **4.4.4.2 Spirituality in the Rules of 1987**

From 1980 to 1986 all the Sisters were involved in the revision of the existing Rules, which were approved in 1987. These are currently still in use, but are in the process of being revised (CA 2016:21.2-21.5). These Rules (1987:1-8) delineate Comboni's spirituality and the one of the Congregation. Both have their focus on the centrality of the Cross and the Sacred Heart, which come together in the Crucified Jesus (:3-4). Also, a “‘spirit of sacrifice’ is essential – this being understood as a willingness to lose all, to suffer and to undertake anything for God and the mission” (:4.1). Through contemplation of the Crucified One, the Sisters learn to be in solidarity with people – especially those most needy and abandoned – even in the midst of privations and dangers, in order to contribute to the building of the Kingdom of God (:4.3, 6). Furthermore, Mary plays an important role in the Sisters' spirituality, as the one who “prepares the coming of Christ among people who do not yet know Him” (:5). To her, the Sisters entrust their lives (:5,1).

Propaganda Fide, in the *Decretum* of approval of the Rules (1987:page 6, my translation), defines the spirituality of the Comboni Sisters, thus:

[The Sisters], by contemplating the Heart of Jesus, have to assimilate His profound sentiments of unconditional self-donation to the Father, by participation in the suffering and the poverty of men [sic], especially in their spiritual poverty. In their daily missionary activity, they have to try to reflect a vital participation in the love of the Pierced Heart of Jesus the Good Shepherd, who gives his life freely for the salvation of humankind.

#### **4.4.4.3 The Acts of the Chapter of 1988**

It is in more recent times that the Comboni Missionary Sisters have attempted to develop and deepen the feminine way of living Comboni's charism. This process began in a more structured way with the Acts of the Chapter of 1998 and continues still. Through consecration to mission, the Sisters feel “called to express the *motherhood* of

God” (CA 1998:1),<sup>106</sup> by displaying those characteristics that are peculiar to women: compassion, intuition, welcoming, solidarity, mutual care, and ability to foster community (:2). In this context, “the contemplation of the Crucified one is the source of a dynamic process that leads to making his sentiments one’s own and to identify him in the face of the people with whom we live” (5).

#### 4.4.4.4 Entering a *time of silence*

The Sisters recognise the thirst for contemplation as one of the characteristics of their life (CA 1992:I.D2.a; II.1). Brambilla deepens this thirst, expressing the need to “enter into a time of particular silence, in order to renew in us the determination to enter into deep contemplation” (29.6.2002 Prot. 282/02, my translation). In a very Combonian, and at the same time, very feminine way, contemplation means “keeping the eyes fixed on Him who is everything for us; we need to touch Him like the woman of the Gospel who struggles to find a way into the crowd.” It is a kind of contemplation that is not an end in itself. Rather, through silence and contemplation the Sisters can pass “from contemplation of the Face [of Jesus] to the contemplation of the faces” (Ibid.). That is, contemplation of Jesus then leads to contemplation of Jesus in those with whom He himself identified – the poorest and most abandoned. And this leads to action in favour of these people. The study aid *Se con viva fede contempleranno* (*Study aid for a time of Contemplation*), issued by the Comboni Missionary Sisters in 2002 describes this as a dynamic movement, which consists in *contemplating, letting oneself be inspired, and acting*. This movement was the driving force that characterised Comboni’s life, and that was meant also for his missionaries, both men and women (:32). “Passion for Jesus Christ and for the Kingdom becomes passion – to give one’s life – for wounded humanity; it becomes regeneration ... so that Africa may really be transformed into a land of blessing” (:33, my translation). In a way, this movement reflects my mission spirituality spiral, of which spirituality is the motor. The “*letting oneself be inspired and acting*” can, in my view, include both the encounter with others and with their context, and the discernment for ways of being in mission. The other dimensions of the spiral are not explicitly considered in this movement.

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<sup>106</sup> The Acts of the Chapter of 1970, 1977, 1980, 1986, 1992, 1998 are in Italian. All quotations are my translations.

Martyrdom and the Cross were very much a part of Comboni's life and are essential in a missionary vocation. Comboni is very clear: "The Cross and martyrdom are the life of the apostolate in infidel [sic] nations" (To Cardinal Giovanni Simeoni 2.1.1879, in *Writings*:5522).<sup>107</sup> Various Acts of the Chapters (CA 1970:32, 75, 80; CA 1988:8; CA 2004:69) remind us that martyrdom is part of the Sisters' vocation. In the study aid for a time of contemplation – *Se con viva fede contempleranno* – the Comboni Sisters (2002:16-17) explain this in more depth:

On our journey as Comboni Sisters there are two words we cannot do away with: Cross and Martyrdom. The martyrdom of leaving, of going, and of losing, the martyrdom of a great yearning despite our fragility, imprisoned in our poverty, in our own history. This is the cross we have to carry. We are not alone. Together the "yoke is easy and the burden light."<sup>108</sup>

#### 4.4.4.5 The fruits of the *time of silence*

The thirst for silence and contemplation *gave birth* to a symposium on spirituality in 2003 during which various talks were given on Combonian spirituality and on the life and spirituality of Comboni Sisters in the history of the Congregation. In this way, various feminine characteristics of Combonian spirituality were confirmed, and some new ones were identified. Of these, I want to highlight the desire for integrating and deepening the dimensions of the charism (spirituality, evangelisation, and consecration) (Suore Missionarie Comboniane 2003:461). All the characteristics that emerged were later recorded in the Acts of the Chapter of 2004. These outlined ways of living out the attitudes essential for a Combonian feminine spirituality. They are the immersion "in the mystical experience of the Plan, looking at Africa in the pure light of faith as Comboni did ... [the assumption of] the mysticism<sup>109</sup> of regeneration ... the mysticism of *the leaven which disappears in the dough*" (CA 2004:71). Like the ancient women of the Gospel, the Sisters are called to live a "mysticism of daring" (:72). It is a mysticism of *proclamation, of patience, of forgiveness and reconciliation, of the hidden stone*,<sup>110</sup>

<sup>107</sup> Other numbers in the Writings of Comboni, where it is stated that the missionaries must be ready for martyrdom and that Cross and martyrdom are the part of mission are: 2592, 2892, 3308, 5216, 5276, 5281, 5397, 5587-8, 5449, 6656.

<sup>108</sup> This communal aspect is taken up in the Acts of the Chapter of 2016 in which the Sisters emphasise the importance of "[t]he call to encounter for mission together" (CA 2016:8.1); of living and evangelising together as community (:3.4, 10.1, 13.2).

<sup>109</sup> The Italian term *mistica* is translated by the Sisters into English as *mysticism*.

<sup>110</sup> It refers to the image of the missionary as the "hidden foundation" of the building of the African Church that Comboni describes in the Rules of 1871 (in *Writings*:2701).

and of *compassion* (:72). Looking at Comboni mysticism, that finds its sources in Comboni's Plan and the Rules of 1871, the Sisters concluded that "contemplation and action are one and the same: two dimensions of living the mission as women of the Gospel today" (:73). The strong desire for contemplation that has been re-awakened in the Congregation has led the Sisters to realise that "contemplation becomes missionary passion" (CA 2004:67). The deep relationship between spirituality and mission – one that must become fully integrated – is thus very clear. The Acts of the Chapter of 1970 (:158) already mentioned the importance of *linking* "contemplation ... and the apostolic zeal, with which [the Sisters] try to collaborate in the work of redemption." However, they too, do not explain how this is supposed to happen.

In the Acts of the Chapter of 2010, the Sisters elaborated upon the theme *Holy and Capable, to regenerate life, and life in abundance*. The Sisters perceive the call to be authentically

holy and capable, mystical and prophetic women who know how to listen to God and His Word; women capable of seeing the world prophetically and keeping their ears tuned to the cry of a wounded and excluded humanity, in order to continue offering a charismatic response (CA 2010:7).

Again, in the Acts of the Chapter of 2010, there emerges the challenge to live a motherhood, through which the Sisters can "nurture life with courage and constancy, living in hope the reality of the Cross, even to its ultimate consequences" (CA 2010:8). This affirmation binds together various aspects of the feminine Combonian spirituality. This kind of spirituality is, on the one hand, indissolubly bound up with annihilation at the Cross, yet, on the other hand, empowers the generation and nurturing of life, so that others may have life in abundance. It is also a spirituality that enables one to face difficulties, suffering and even martyrdom, in all its facets, as indicated earlier. It was this kind of spirituality that sustained the Sisters (and the missionaries) who suffered offences, torture, and humiliation during the imprisonment in the time of the Mahdist revolution, as I described earlier with the example of Sr. Teresa Grigolini (4.3.2.1).

#### **4.4.4.6 A spirituality of encounter**

The latest Acts of the Chapter of 2016 elaborate upon a *spirituality of encounter* (CA 2016:4.1) that is realised in the encounter with God, encounter with selves, with other people, and with Creation. They utilise the biblical stories of Abraham at the oak of Mamre, and of Ruth and Naomi. In both stories the protagonists lived encounters intensely and with great openness that resulted in the fulfilment of an improbable promise (7.1). I will come back later to the theme of encounter as it is essentially the main theme of my mission spirituality spiral.

#### **4.4.4.7 Feminine Combonian spirituality: Concluding comments**

The dream of Comboni was the regeneration of Africa. His dream foreshadowed what emerged almost one century later, with the Second Vatican Council, and with the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Paul VI. According to this Exhortation, the Church has to bring “the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new” (EN 18). Cultures “have to be regenerated by an encounter with the Gospel” (EN 20) (Pierli 1996:137). The Comboni Missionary Sisters, as women of the Gospel, seek to continue to live out Comboni’s spirituality and dream. The feminine spirituality aims to nurture and regenerate life among the poorest and most abandoned, even in the midst of suffering and persecution.

Feminine Combonian spirituality through encounter, aims at bringing about the regeneration of society and *life in abundance*, and intrinsically seeking wholeness and wants to (re)generate wholeness in others. Thus, regeneration and *life in abundance* become synonymous with the wholeness of which Delio (2013:203) speaks, and to which humanity is called. In this process of continuous evolution towards wholeness, there is a call to abandon dualistic thinking and enter *wholly* into the relationality of the Trinity, who draws humanity to participate in God’s mission.



#### 4.4.5 Combonian *ministeriality*

The Comboni Missionary Sisters used the term *ministeriality* in the Acts of the Chapter of 2010. By it, the Sisters mean “the style of our presence and service, a way of being disciples of the Risen Lord, sharing the passion of our founder” (CA 2010:18). The Sisters also decided to make an in-depth study of *ministeriality* (:31) and how it is lived, by holding workshops in all the provinces in 2012, in which almost all the Sisters participated. In these workshops they made use of the SEE-JUDGE-ACT method<sup>111</sup> to structure the workshops (Cristinelli 2013:347). During the workshops, it emerged that *ministeriality* is not simply about *doing* – but also encompasses the ontological, spiritual, and relational aspects of life. *Ministeriality* involves the whole person (:353). It expresses a way of being at a deeper level. It has its roots in an intimate and ongoing relationship with the Good Shepherd of the pierced Heart. Such a relationship enables one to recognise and emulate the Good Shepherd’s way of seeing, and his attitudes, and also to participate in His work (:353-354). Thus, *ministeriality* has a holistic connotation. Moreover, “it expresses the maternal face of God, as it involves liberating humanity from all that dehumanises it, so that it can reach its full potential” (:354, my translation).

From the synthesis of ideas gathered at the workshops it becomes clear that, whilst there is a growing desire for spirituality, “there seems to be no concrete strategies in place as yet, for our ministries to reveal the mystical dimension, from which they flow” (:359, my translation). The Sisters feel there is “a tendency to live in a compartmentalised way. In other words, the ministry is understood mainly as carrying out a profession, whilst its spiritual dimension is lived in private, or in the community” (:359, my translation).

It seems clear, therefore, that, despite the desire to live *ministeriality* in its fullness, the Sisters experience a certain dichotomy between spirituality and action. I suggest that the implementation of the mission spirituality spiral could be a valid tool in order to overcome this dichotomy.

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<sup>111</sup> The SEE-JUDGE-ACT method was advocated by the Belgian Catholic priest Cardijn and was formally recognised by Pope John XXII in his encyclical *Mater et Magistra* published on 15 May 1961.

## **4.5 The Comboni Missionary Sisters and the mission spirituality spiral**

In order to verify the possibility of the Comboni Missionary Sisters making use of the mission spirituality spiral in *ministeriality*, I now examine the various official documents. My purpose in doing so, is to establish to what extent the dimensions of the spiral play a role in their *ministeriality* and whether these are connected and flowing in one another.

### **4.5.1 Spirituality**

Earlier in this chapter, when I explored the spirituality of the Comboni Missionary Sisters, it became evident just how foundational spirituality is for them and their mission activity.

#### **4.5.1.1 Spirituality in the circular letters of the General Superiors**

In examining the circular letters to the Sisters, from the General Superiors, who have led the Congregation, it becomes clear that spirituality always takes first place. The first General Superior, Bollezzoli, invites the Sisters to “greatly value the spiritual things of the Rule, [and to] do them the way the Saints did them, with living faith, pure conscience, reflection and union with God ...” (25.2.1892, in *Donne per la Missione*:19). Spirituality as *union with God* is emphasised by most of the General Superiors. This union is not for its own sake. Its aim is personal sanctification and mission. Costanza Caldara<sup>112</sup> (24.3.1914, in *Donne per la Missione*:55) for example, stresses that union with God is essential for sanctification, and that “God will give the grace to become instruments in God’s hands, in order to do good in mission, where many have to be led to God.” Union with God and the Sacred Heart is the source of mission. This union makes one strong and helps in missionary life and its “aim is nothing else – nor does it have to be – but sanctify ourselves first, in order to then be

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<sup>112</sup> Caldara was the second General Superior of the Congregation from 1901 to 1931.

useful to the salvation of other's souls, especially in the dear mission, where through obedience, the good Lord wants and will want us" (Caldara 23,11,1921, in *Donne per la Missione*:68). She also insists – like other General Superiors – on the Rules being observed, as by observing them, one does the will of God (23.2.1904, in *Donne per la Missione*:42; 19.3.1906:44).

The spirit of sacrifice, that played an important role in Comboni's spirituality, was emulated by the Sisters. This is often referred to in the circular letters. One example may suffice to illustrate this. Caldara, in her last circular letter as General Superior (7.1931, in *Donne per la Missione*:76) writes "Comboni wanted that His Sisters must be lambs for the slaughter, sacrificed in a certain way, to the apostolate of the conversion of the poor [sic] Africans, with every sacrifice and abnegation of themselves, in order to obtain some true good to the Africans."

Federica Bettari,<sup>113</sup> in her circular letter of 24.2.1971 (in *Donne per la Missione*:200) invites the Sisters to meditate on the example shown by Comboni regarding his total faith in God. The section of the Acts of the Chapter she mentions, reads as follows: "In order to live an authentic missionary life, it is of paramount importance that, we, like our Founder, must have '*a strong fervour for the things of the spirit, the study of the interior life and a lively desire for perfection*'" (CA 1970:163). For the Sisters, Comboni's Rules of 1871 (in *Writings*:2706) were considered essential for understanding spirituality.

It is late in the 1970s and early in the 1980s, that both male and female Congregations show a particularly strong interest in Comboni's life, charism, and writings. Much research was done and publications from that time abound. All this helped to create a deeper appreciation and understanding of his charism in its spirituality and mission dimensions (Fusato 2003:45).

Bettari (7.11.1971, in *Donne per la Missione*:202) continuously urges the Sisters to develop a personal relationship with God. In fact, she stated that "the world needs to see in each one of us a mature and whole religious, a person of prayer, who contemplates, who adores and who is totally committed to the brothers [sic] in charity, in simplicity, and in joy." Spirituality and mission are therefore connected. Bettari (:203) points out the importance of spirituality because she senses "that the Sisters are

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<sup>113</sup> She was General Superior from 1970 to 1976.

often affected by the horizontal dimension, by the mentality of “doing”, and they leave out reflection, meditation and prayer.”

A one-sided focus on *doing* is a temptation that not only missionaries but also missiologists face. If mission is considered only to be about *finding strategies for mission*, and *doing* – no matter how good these may be – they remain sterile. The work of mission (and missiology) would then be no different from the works of any NGO. For, whilst the works undertaken by an NGO would certainly be good deeds, they are not equivalent of mission (and missiology) in a Christian sense. In fact, holistic mission is a task of the church, not of NGOs or professionals (Myers 2011:191). Pope Francis, in his first homily as pope, said: “Without faith in Christ's sacrifice on the cross, the church is nothing more than a “pitiful NGO” (in Rocca 2013).

Bettari (19.3.1974, in *Donne per la Missione*:220) speaks of faith as “*the encounter with God*.” By the way they interact with the people, the Sisters ought to reflect their personal encounter with God. If they do, they will be communicating the “*living encounter with the Person of the living God*” (1.11.1974:224). Bettari utilises the term *encounter* in the same way I employ it in the mission spirituality spiral.

Earlier in this chapter (4.4.4), I mentioned how Brambilla involved the Sisters in a process of deepening spirituality and contemplation. She invited them to enter into *a time of silence*, for the purpose of having an intense experience of contemplative prayer. In her circular letters, she refers to this need.<sup>114</sup>

#### 4.5.1.2 Spirituality in the Acts of the Chapters

The Acts are issued after every General Chapter.<sup>115</sup> The General Superiors often refer to them in their circular letters, and the whole Congregation is committed to implement the new directives in the Acts in their daily lives. In order to establish to what extent the dimensions of the mission spirituality spiral play a role in the Acts, I have examined all the Acts issued from Chapters that took place from 1970 to date. I

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<sup>114</sup> A few examples may suffice: Brambilla: 5.12.1999 Prot. 561/99; 3.12.2000 Prot. 510/00; 29.6.2002 Prot. 282/02; 6.1.2006 Prot. 03/06; 1.9.2009 Prot. 439/09. Brambilla, in the circular of 13.3.2005 (Prot. 125/05), announced an important event that was of great significance, with regard to contemplation, on the spiritual journey that the Congregation was undergoing – the opening of a house of prayer in Limone sul Garda, close to Comboni's place of birth. “The community will be a place of contemplation, the ring that connects inseparable aspects of mission: prayer and action ...”

<sup>115</sup> A General Chapter takes place every 6 years. During it, the General Superior and her Council are elected.

have started with the Acts of the Chapter of 1970 because they are the fruit of the *aggiornamento* that was occurring in the Church after the Second Vatican Council. These Acts (CA 1970:12) stress the priority of a “spiritual renewal” for the Congregation. I discussed the *Combonian Spirituality* that was proposed in them earlier. What seems important is that prayer, as dialogue (and encounter) with God, must be at the centre of the lives of the Sisters (:68), and that they must be “true contemplatives in action” (:71). No wonder that, in fidelity to Comboni, who often emphasised the importance of prayer, the first part of Chapter III (CA 1970:150-201) bears the title “Our Prayer.” The Sisters are called to “union with God, not only during the moments dedicated to prayer, but in the concreteness of everyday life” (:150). Yet, one can get the impression that these Acts propose “a “*spirituality*” of “doing”, focused on behaviours, virtues and choices in life, without indicating the source” (Fusato 2003:43, my translation).

The Rule of Life of 1977 was the fruit of the General Chapter of 1970 and during the six-year period that followed, the whole congregation contributed to its compilation. Thus, the Acts issued after the General Chapter in 1977, comprised just a small document, in which a few points from the Rule itself were reported. It is important to stress that one of these few points emphasised that friendship with Christ must be at the centre of life (CA 1977:14). The Acts strongly invite the Sisters to a greater commitment to prayer so that “personal prayer may be authentic” (:20).

At the beginning of the Acts of the Chapter of 1980, the awareness of the need for a spiritual renewal that may revive the missionary life, is very evident (CA 1980:2). This renewal has to bring about an integration of prayer and life (:4). The need for *integration* is also mentioned in the last part of the Acts of the Chapter (cf. Programming: Section 1 Spiritual Renewal). The mandate is to “promote and intensify the integration of spiritual and apostolic life.” Nevertheless, the Acts of the Chapter of 1980 do not explain how this *integration* will happen.

When talking about “unity of life,” the Acts of the Chapter of 1986 (CA 1986:3.d), invite the Sisters to constantly go back to God, who is the primary source of any apostolic and charitable action. They also stress the importance of reflecting on the history of the Congregation, as it is a source of spirituality (:2.a, b).

Earlier in this chapter (4.4.4), we have seen how contemplation is recognised by the Sisters as a movement of *remaining* (Jn 15:9) and *going out* (Mk 16:15) (CA

1992:I.D.2); how the Sisters developed a Combonian feminine spirituality (CA 1998); and how a special time of contemplation led to a symposium on spirituality in 2003.

The desire for contemplation is seen as “an essential and foundational element of [the Sisters’] spirituality” and “becomes missionary passion” for these women of the Gospel (CA 2004:67).

With regard to the Acts of the Chapter of 2010, they focused on the theme *Holy and Capable* in order to generate life in abundance, and I have dealt with it earlier (4.4.4.5).

At the last General Chapter in 2016 (CA 2016:5-7), the Sisters elaborated upon a *spirituality of encounter*, which I mentioned earlier in this chapter (4.4.4). The Sisters (CA 2016:5.1) stated that

the centrality of the call of the Spirit to the Congregation leads us to consider mission as the ‘theological context of the spirituality of encounter: a mission lived through a **Spirituality**, of being familiar with God, of **remaining** in the intimacy of a relationship with Him, so as to share His deep desire of gathering our scattered lives into unity. If we are to overcome our struggles and persevere ‘on the journey of ENCOUNTER,’ we must listen to the Word and fix our eyes on Christ hanging on the Cross with his arms open, drawing to Himself all of humanity (Jn 12:32) (Bold and capital letters appear in original).

Although the Sisters do not explain what exactly they mean by considering mission as the “theological context” of the spirituality of encounter, it is clear that encounter and relationship with God are the starting point for mission.

#### 4.5.1.3 Spirituality in the Rule of Life

The Rule of life that the Sisters follow, presents the characteristics of the spirituality of Comboni and that of the Sisters (RoL 2-4, 40-49). As these have emerged in the above exploration of the Sisters’ spirituality, at this point, I simply want to recall what is written in the Rule about prayer (:41):

Prayer evoked in us by the Spirit, opens our heart to the contemplation of the love of God for every person and incites us to dedicate all our life to missionary action. With our eyes fixed on Jesus, we learn ‘the meaning of a God who died on the cross for the salvation of the world.’ Stimulated by fervid zeal and a lively spirit of sacrifice, we pray ‘not only with words, but with the ardour of faith and charity.’

From the above exploration, it is clear that spirituality is essential in the life and work of the Comboni Missionary Sisters. The challenge that emerges, is the need to integrate it with all the activities, in which they are involved. It is also clear that the Sisters live their spirituality in faithfulness to Comboni's charism, and that they do this in a feminine way.

### **4.5.2 Encounter**

Encounter with the other(s) and their context is the second dimension of the mission spirituality spiral and is an important dimension that every missionary is called to live. In Chapter Three, we saw how Comboni lived the encounter with Africa and the Africans. The Sisters, as well as the missionaries, at the time of Comboni, were blessed to have in him a good example of how people and cultures ought to be approached. Comboni used to praise the way in which the Sisters approached the people and worked for their good. Yet, at times, he complained that the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* did not know Arabic.<sup>116</sup>

#### **4.5.2.1 Encounter in the Circular Letters and interview**

In the circular letters of the General Superiors, especially in the early days of the Congregation, not much was said about how to live the encounter with others and their context. Their letters focused more on spirituality and the importance of following the Rule of Life. This was because, in the initial stages of the Congregation, the Sisters had to absorb the spirituality of the founder and the Rule of life so as to be well-rooted, identified in them, and in order to find stability as a Congregation.

Details about the kind of encounter the Sisters lived with the people might be found in biographies of Sisters. However, exploring those goes beyond the purpose of this research, as I am focusing mainly on the official documents of the Congregation. I will be looking at some biographical aspects in the analysis of the interviews in the next chapter.

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<sup>116</sup> A few examples in this regard may suffice: To his father 20.12.1880, in *Writings*:6185; To Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti 5.2.1881, in *Writings*:6432; To Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti 12.2.1881, in *Writings*:6454-6456, 6481).

Mariangela Sardi<sup>117</sup> (11.11.1993 Circolare n.2) stresses the fact that contemplation is authentic, when one can recognise God, not only, in Scripture and the Eucharist, but also in the people. Referring to the Rule of Life (RoL 42), she asserts that prayer must be marked by the human realities in which the Sisters are inserted, and must lead to solidarity with the poorest and most abandoned.

Brambilla, in her circular letters, places special emphasis on “making common cause” and “sharing with the people’s situations of prolonged suffering, of injustice, of precariousness, of uncertainty, of abandonment” (21.11.998 Prot. 376/98; 3.12.2000 Prot. 510/00). She also speaks of being “illuminated by the gaze of the people, by their mysticism, by their faith, and by their hope ...” (5.10.2007 Prot. 351/07). These words show that the encounter with the other(s) is not a one-way process. Rather, it is about mutual enrichment.

In two of her circulars, Brambilla (7.12.2009 Prot. 494/09; 8.12.2006 Prot. 478/06) speaks of “people that welcome us.” Although she does not specify what this means, one can easily read between the lines and conclude that behind this expression lies the awareness of the Sisters being guests among a people, and that respect, patience, and mutuality in the relationships are of paramount importance.

Luzia Premoli, General Superior from 2010 to 2016, emphasises the importance of encounter with God, with the Word, with ourselves, and with the others (8.12.2015 Prot. VIB12/609/2015). She does that looking at the lifestyle of Mary from whom “we discover her capacity to listen, to ponder, to meditate on the Word, that is, to give precious time to God ... to give time to herself ... to give time to others so as to participate in daily life, to celebrate, to help, to serve, to console and to listen.”

Luigia Coccia, General Superior since 2016, in an interview, focuses on encounter: “Evangelisation has always been a matter of ‘encounter,’ a gifts exchange ... letting oneself being welcomed and welcoming ...” (2017:3, my translation). She emphasises that “all that we do is like an open door ‘to encounter’ the other, to offer ourselves, not only our knowledge and our abilities, so as to encounter the other in his/her totality, not as a brother or a Sister who need our help.” Such encounter involves “listening ... openness to newness, availability to change, reciprocity ...” (:4).

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<sup>117</sup> Sardi was General Superior from 1992 to 1998. The circular letters of Sardi are cited with the date and the Protocol number (with exception of the first three circulars, which are numbered as Circolare n. 1, 2, 3), as they are still in the current archives of the Comboni Missionary Sisters.



#### 4.5.2.2 Encounter in the Acts of the Chapters

The Acts of the various Chapters are generally more explicit with regard to the best way of encountering the people. Before going into detail, it is worth mentioning that an important first step was taken by the Sisters in terms of at the General Chapter of 1931. The Acts of this Chapter state that a decision was made that “the Sisters, – destined for Africa – who are coming from the Mother House [Verona], may have their training in the Provincial Houses in Egypt and the Sudan – under the direction of the Provincials there” (APMR, VI/C6/1/13-2134, my translation). This highlights the importance placed on careful preparation before encounter takes place.

It is noteworthy that the Acts of the Chapter of 1970 (CA 1970:287-291), when dealing with mission activity, do so with reference to the documents of the Second Vatican Council, and the titles of the various phases of the mission activity listed, indicate the kind of witness the Sisters must live. The Acts of the Chapter describe how to establish contact. It has to be done “in love and with respect for the socio-cultural conditions of the people” (CA 1970:292). In what they call *incarnation*, the Sisters are to establish “relationships of esteem and love” (:293) with the people whom they encounter. This process of incarnation requires that, one leaves behind, as it were, one’s own culture, in order to accept and assume the values of the people to whom one is sent. Also, adaptation to the language, customs and traditions of those people are essential (:294). Taking Paul as example: “I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them ...” (1 Cor 9:19-22) , these Acts require from the Sisters an incarnation that one might think to be an attitude close the *going native* one.<sup>118</sup> However, the Sisters do not certainly mean a naïve *going native*, first of all because it is not possible. In fact, one cannot achieve a total identification with the people of another culture because, being born, having grown up in one culture and having been moulded by it, one cannot completely get rid of one’s own culture (Whiteman 2012:89).

The importance of adjusting to the needs of mission is well expressed by the Sisters in the Acts of the Chapter of 1977. This adjustment requires a “constant and sincere revision of our attitudes, activities and methods of work, confronting them with the Gospel, in the context in which we are inserted, and in the kind of presence that is expected from us” (CA 1977:3). In this short statement, the various dimensions of the

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<sup>118</sup> “Going native is a neurotic form of identification, a compulsion for belonging to the society whose culture is responsible for the cultural stress being experienced” (Luzbetak 1988:218).

mission spirituality spiral are found: reflexivity – the need for evaluation and revision; theological reflection – reference to the Gospel; encounter with the context through insertion; and a veiled reference to context analysis and discernment in the kind of presence that is required. Thus, it is an important statement, but incomplete insofar as the spiral is concerned, and connections between the various dimensions need to be made.

The Acts of the Chapter of 1980 (CA 1980:3) stress the importance of knowing the local culture and language, so as to enhance the encounter, both with the people and their context. This is necessary for a “respectful and effective insertion in a particular cultural context” (CA 1992:II.3.2; cf. CA 1970:326). The Sisters have to be free of any sense of superiority, and must trust the people. They have “to work **with**, rather than work **for** the people” (CA 1992:II.3.5, bold in original), so that the encounter happens on an equal footing.

Another way of enhancing encounter is “to be inserted among the people, in the dialogue of life with them ...” (CA 1986:6.d; cf. CA 2004:36). The Sisters feel urged “to ‘make common cause’ with the peoples to whom we are sent, even to giving our lives as martyrs, in the event of this being required” (CA 1992:I.C.2). For Comboni, meeting these challenges was essential.

The theme of the General Chapter 2016 and thus of its respective Acts is: *Daring the mystery of encounter: In order to live Combonian mission today*. Encounter is, for the Sisters, the central theme that guides them in “collaborating with the ‘mission of God’ in history” (CA 2016:4.1). They feel challenged “more than ever to be *women of encounter* called to protect and nurture life” (:1.1). Here, it seems that there is a transition from being the women of the Gospel to be the women of encounter. However, one could also say that there is a fusion of the two ideas, because both include encounter with God, the Gospel, others, and the context, and this generates, protects and nurtures life. To become women of encounter, one of the conditions is “[t]o immerse oneself in the life of the people, becoming real presence in sharing the joys and struggle of others” (:7.4). It is worth mentioning that in preparation for the General Chapter, all the communities of Sisters were asked to live an experience of encounter with people in situations that were unfamiliar or unknown to them. A process of discernment and times of prayer prepared the community for these encounters (CA 2016:9.1). Through these experiences of encounter, the Sisters came to discover their biases, fears, and shortcomings, as well as the beauty of genuine dialogue, intent listening, respect and

understanding for the other(s), and the beauty of journeying together as a listening presence and not as a protagonist (:9.1). These are the attitudes that are important for a genuine encounter to come about.

From this short exploration, it is evident that there is a growing desire to better understand and try to live the kind of encounter, that will result in a more relevant and transformative way of being in mission.

### 4.5.3 Context Analysis

Those who make use of the mission spirituality spiral, ought to do an analysis of the context, if a proper discernment for transformative ways of being in mission, is to be reached. I now investigate to what extent this has been done by the Comboni Missionary Sisters.

The need for context analysis is not addressed in the circular letters of the General Superiors. It is only in the 1970s that the relevance of a social analysis is mentioned in the Acts of the Chapter, although the phrase *context* or *social analysis* is not used. What they do indicate, however, is that, in the various fields where the Sisters work, their missionary activity has to change in order to respond more effectively to the real situations and the demands of the context. (CA 1970:298-302). It is made clear, therefore, that context analysis is necessary before appropriate changes can be made.

The Acts of the Chapter of 1980 address this issue more explicitly. They indicate that, besides respect for the cultural values of a context, it is important to promote inculturation and to “seriously study the context in order to know the socio-cultural reality in which they are inserted ...” (CA 1980:3.c). At the beginning of the Acts of the Chapter of 1992 (CA 1992: I.C.1-4) there is a short analysis of the challenges that the world presents, at socio-political and ecclesial levels. These Acts of the Chapter insist that the Sisters should delve into context analysis, so as to identify the emerging challenges, and evaluate the answers in relation to the charism (CA 1992:II.3.2).

It is surprising that, the Acts of the Chapter of 2004, do not speak of context analysis, but they do stress the challenges that the new *areopagi*<sup>119</sup> represent for them

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<sup>119</sup> The term *Areopagus* was used by Pope John Paul II in the Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*. According to the Encyclical the term today “can be taken as a symbol of the new sectors in which the Gospel must be proclaimed” (RM 37).

(CA 2004:26). They envisage a process of *redesigning*<sup>120</sup> presences and ministries (:32), “keeping in mind the local situations” (:42). On the one hand, one may have the impression that context analysis, in order to implement the *redesigning*, is implicit. On the other hand, this may also mean that context analysis does not actually take place.

In the Acts of the Chapter of 2010, the Sisters perceive the challenge to “continue the process of redesigning our presences and contextualising the reflection on ministries in order to make incisive, meaningful and prophetic charismatic decisions ...” (CA 2010:24). Lamentably, this positive assertion is not followed up with indications as to how this has to happen.

The first part of the Acts of the Chapter of 2016 includes a short analysis that highlights the ambivalence of globalisation (CA 2016:1.2) and looks at the emerging challenges (:1.3). By listening to the reports of the various sectors of the Congregation, the Sisters declare that they “become more aware of particular areas which need our attention” (:1.5) both *ad intra* and *ad extra*. Moreover, these Acts provide accurate details of the present situation of the Congregation in terms of personnel (:2.2-2.4), professional training (2.5), and material resources (2.7). Whilst the Acts do make an analysis, they do not speak explicitly of the need for undergoing a serious context analysis, when reflecting on redesigning and re-qualifying presences and ministries (:13.2). One of the mandates of these Acts reads: “We shall continue the process of redesigning our presences according to the charism and to our priorities” (:22.3). On the one hand, this way of proceeding might seem to allow the Congregation to remain faithful to the charism and its priorities. But on the other hand, if charism and its priorities become absolute, the Congregation can face the risk of setting aside a serious context analysis, and so prevent the necessary discernment for relevant ways of being in mission. Ministries can easily be out of touch and so give rise to superficial encounters. I will expand on this in Chapter Five (5.3.3) and in Chapter Six (6.3.3).

#### **4.5.4 Theological reflection**

In everyday life, Comboni had the habit of drawing from Scripture and Tradition and he wanted missionaries to do likewise. The need for study of Scripture and other theological disciplines are particularly stressed at the male Institute in Egypt (Comboni

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<sup>120</sup> The Acts of the Chapters define *redesigning* for the Sisters: “[It] is a term we are using to indicate new opening, closure and re-qualification of personnel and ministries” (CA 2004:32).

to Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò 4.1870, in *Writings*:2235). For the Sisters, this is not explicitly indicated. Yet, they have to practice daily meditation which is based on Scripture. The Rules of 1874 (in *Positio* I:365-366) indicate that the Sisters have to dedicate themselves to the study of theology and the catechism.

The first General Superiors did not often refer to Scripture in their circular letters. It is Bettari, who refers to or quotes from the Scriptures and Church documents.<sup>121</sup> This is not surprising, as this was the period just after the Second Vatican Council, and so, following the invitation of the Church after the Council (cf. PC 6; DV 21), in the Acts of the Chapter of 1970 there emerges a sense of the importance of meditating daily with the Holy Scripture as a source of one's prayer life (CA 1970:164-168). "The Gospel must have a central place in our reading and in study, both in private and in community, and especially in our meditation ..." (:166). But, together with Scripture, the spiritual life has also to be nourished by Church Documents and texts from the Fathers of the Church, "that help to give an exhaustive answer to the issues raised by men [sic] today" (:168). Thus, the link between world situations and Scripture and Tradition is established. However, one can have the impression that answers are not anchored in everyday life.

The Acts of the Chapter of 1992 invite the Sisters to intensify their listening to the Word of God (CA 1992:II.1.2.e), but they do not stress the relationship between it and their mission activity.

Brambilla (5.12.1999 Prot. 561/99) speaks of the necessity to "immerse oneself in the Word of God, who ... sends us, inviting us to seek together new ways, along roads that no one wants to go." The Word of God, therefore, becomes a means to link the situations in which people live with new ways of being in mission. In another letter she speaks of the call for silence in order "to be introduced through the Word into the vast world of God" (29.6.2002 Prot. 282/02). In her circular letters, Brambilla interprets Scripture from the experience she has of the situation (we can call it *context*) of the Congregation in that moment.

I have discussed earlier the spirituality and meaning of being *women of the Gospel* for the Sisters, especially in terms of the Acts of the Chapter of 2004. The introductory letter of these Acts puts one in touch with Scripture (CA 2004:pages 5-6). In these Acts various references to Scripture and to Church documents can be found. However, a deep

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<sup>121</sup> A few examples may suffice: Bettari 16.2.1972, in *Donne per la missione*:204-206; 7.3.1973:212; 19.3.1974:219-222; 11.11.1974:223-226; 9.9.1975:227-230.

theological reflection, linking experience and the context, to Scripture, does not seem to be developed. For instance, the redesigning of presences has to be done “in the light of the Plan of Comboni, of the history of the Congregation, the documents of the Church, the signs of times and the wisdom of the peoples of the world” (CA 2004:32). Scripture does not seem to find a place in this process.

Likewise, the Acts of the Chapter of 2010 often refer to Scriptural texts and Church documents (CA 2010:3, 4, 18, 21, 35, etc.), but do not indicate how to engage in theological reflection, in order to discern new ways of being in mission.

In 2010, an icon of Comboni, which also depicted scenes taken from Scripture, was painted (Figure 2).<sup>122</sup> The General administration invited Sisters as well as Comboni Fathers and theologians to pray with it and share some reflections on the icon itself. A good number of these reflections<sup>123</sup> not only interpret Scripture but also establish a link with the Combonian charism, feminine spirituality and with the reality in which the Sisters live and work.



Figure 2

<sup>122</sup> The icon was “written” by Domenica Ghidotti.

<sup>123</sup> The reflections are gathered in the book *Le “donne del Vangelo” nella luce di San Daniele Comboni*. (2010).

In the Acts of the Chapter of 2016, which focus on encounter, reference is made to two texts from the Old Testament (Gen 18:1-15 and the book of Ruth) that, through the Spirituality of encounter, enhance the reflection on mission (CA 2016:6.1-6.8). Here, mission is linked to Scripture.

The Rule of Life (RoL 1987:43), to which the Sisters commit, describes the Word of God as “a perennial and irreplaceable source of spiritual life.” However, although it states that “prayer is deeply affected by the human situations in which we live” (:42, my translation), it does not elaborate upon the link between the interpretation of Scripture and Tradition in the context and personal and communal spiritual experiences.

In all, it seems clear that the Comboni Missionary Sisters engage in theological reflection by utilising Scripture and the Church documents. What seems to be missing in the official documents of the Congregation, is the contextualised use of Scripture and Tradition. On the other hand, it has to be kept in mind that official documents are written to all the Sisters, who are living and operating in the most varied places and situations, and experiencing the most varied challenges. Therefore, it becomes difficult to make a contextualised theological reflection that can be relevant for all.

#### **4.5.5 Discernment for transformative ways of being in mission**

Discernment is an important dimension of the mission spirituality spiral. I have mentioned earlier that, for Comboni, discernment was a regular practice, and that he expected his missionaries, both men and women, to follow his example in this regard. The Sisters have seen the significance of this dimension. Decisions must be taken by means of a process of discernment. I now examine the documents of the special General Chapter held in 1970, because it is from that time that, the General Superiors and the Acts of the Chapters have focused more and more on discernment.

In the Acts of the Chapter of 1970, the word discernment does not appear. Yet, after the experience of the Second Vatican Council, the Sisters tended to follow the example of the Church in “scrutinizing the signs of the times” (GS 4). “Based on her example, we must see to what extent the style of our missionary activity ... must be subject to changes ...” (CA 1970:298). Moreover, “historical changes and actual problems of the Congregation have to be considered” (:98).

In 1980, the Acts of the Chapter draw attention to the importance of personal and community discernment, in order to find solutions that respond to the needs of the local Churches and to the Combonian charism (CA 1980:3.e). Discernment, therefore, must happen both at personal and community levels. Criteria for discerning what commitments ought to be made regarding to pastoral activity, are given, for example, by the Acts of the Chapter of 1986 (CA 1986:6.2). Emerging situations (such as migrants, refugees, etc.) must in particular be taken into consideration (:6.5).

The Rule of Life (1987:15) indicates that “[b]y means of a discernment made in the light of the Gospel and our charism, we read the signs of the times in the historical events.” This means openness to changing situations in the world, and the context, in which the Sisters live and operate. The implied inclusion of members of the local Church in discerning how to give relevant answers to the fast changing situations (:15.1), shows the intention of undergoing a sound discernment. Thus, it also appears that discernment should be a constant in the life of the Congregation and of each Sister. Yet, surprisingly in the section on the life of obedience, the Rule of Life states that “[in] *particular* circumstances, we meet together for community discernment in order to understand what the Lord wants from us” (:29.5, italics mine). Here, it seems that contrary to paragraph 15, discernment is no longer ongoing, but something occasional.

Brambilla (3.12.2000 Prot. 510/00) invites the Sisters “to pay attention to what emerges as possible source of vitality in the various Provinces when doing community discernment.”

The Acts of the Chapter of 2004 (CA 2004:56) state that discernment

must become a way of life ... [It] is rendered possible through listening to the Word of God, to ourselves, to the other, to the community, to the Local Church and to historical events. It is a way of educating ourselves to the harmonic [sic] bond between spirituality, consecration and mission. Both discernment and authentic relationships require faith sharing and the common search for truth within the community.

From the above, it is clear that discernment is of the utmost importance in personal life, in community and also in mission. The Acts also recommend helpful practices, which would enable it to become a “way of life.” These are: “the consciousness examen<sup>124</sup> ... spiritual direction and mentoring, exchange and sharing

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<sup>124</sup> The *examen* is a daily practice that helps one to become aware of the presence of God in everyday life. It was a practice that Ignatius of Loyola described in his *Spiritual Exercises*, and he wanted the members of his community to practise it. Aschenbrenner (1972) explains the difference between the



within the community, practice of listening, of dialogue and evaluation with the responsible persons at various levels, fraternal obedience, and the human sciences ...” (:57). Regarding redesigning the presence “we need to constantly discern actual needs, the degree of involvement of local people, the style of administration, and the networking that will guarantee continuity even after our eventual withdrawal” (:35). Here, the Sisters seem to regard the inclusion of the local people as essential for discernment. These two aspects (discernment as “way of life” and discernment when *redesigning* presences), which are respectively placed under the sections *consecrated life* and *evangelisation*, can render more justice to discernment, if they are fused together. As a matter of fact, discernment for transformative ways of being in mission is a personal and communal spiritual act. At the same time, it also involves the actual needs of local people and it, therefore, needs their participation and involvement.

The Acts of the Chapter of 2010 expand on discernment. In the section about community life, the Sisters state that they are challenged “[t]o listen to the Word, share it and interpret reality in its light for an ongoing personal and community discernment” (CA 2010:77). This statement about discernment involves the process of encountering the Word – and therefore is done in a *spiritual space* – and reality, and puts more emphasis on the fact that discernment is an ongoing process. It should permeate one’s whole life. Personal and community discernment is needed when a reflection “on the development and evaluation of new modalities of community life [is done, in order] to respond to the challenges of mission today, while, at the same time, valuing already existing experiences” (:86). In the last statement, the Sisters combine discernment and reflexivity.

The identified challenge “[t]o assume discernment as a lifestyle at all levels – personal, community and ministerial – in which exchange and evaluation are considered indispensable tools” (:115), and the subsequent decision to insert this in the Rule of Life, shows a great step forward in terms of realising the importance of discernment in order to find relevant ways of being in mission. In other words, the challenge to engage in discernment at all levels is “in order to be women capable of living in fidelity to the mission to which we are called, in all its complexity and diversity in the various

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examen of conscience and of consciousness: “When examen is related to discernment, it becomes examen of *consciousness* rather than of conscience. Examen of conscience has narrow moralistic overtones. Its prime concern was with the good or bad actions we have done each day. Whereas in discernment the prime concern is not with the morality of good or bad actions; rather the concern is with the way God is affecting and moving us (often quite spontaneously!) deep in our own affective consciousness.”

contexts” (:110). In this regard, one of the commitments made by the Sisters is “[t]o include in our community plan spaces for integration, exchange and evaluation that will facilitate a continuous practice of discernment and the formation of a critical conscience” (:120).

The Acts of the Chapter of 2016, simply remind the Sisters that discernment is an ongoing and essential process (CA 2016:6.7).

From the above exploration, it would seem that the practice of discernment is very important to the Comboni Missionary Sisters, as, at times, it is used with the Word of God, or in the analysis of changing situations, or in the process of evaluation. This indicates that the Sisters may find real benefit in making use of the mission spirituality spiral, which has discernment as one of its dimensions.

#### **4.5.6 Reflexivity**

I come now to reflexivity, which is the last dimension of the mission spirituality spiral. We have seen that Comboni himself was accustomed to evaluate, analyse, and revise his ideas and activities (cf. Chapter Three). I now explore the Comboni Missionary Sisters’ documents, in order to ascertain whether they too have practised reflexivity regularly in one way or another.

Over the years, the Sisters have always made use of evaluation, both in their community life and in their work, yet, this is not really emphasised in the circular letters of the Superior Generals. However, it is Brambilla (7.12.2009 Prot. 494/09), who does wisely state that: “[W]e must have the courage to allow ourselves to be questioned and evaluated by the Word, the Charism, the ways of the Congregation, by the peoples who welcome us, by the NOW of history.” This assertion is then elaborated upon in the Acts of the Chapter of 2010, on which I will comment later.

The Acts of the Chapter of 1970 indicate that, in the light of the *signs of the times*, a revision, a restructuring, and an adaptation to the actual situations has to happen (CA 1970:291.b). Thus, in any context, the actual situations become, therefore, a point of reference in the evaluation of the Sisters’ presence. A great importance is placed upon the evaluation of the programmed work, which is conducted by the General Council, its various offices, and the Provincial Superiors (:854).

The Acts of the Chapter of 1977, referring to the ones of the Chapter of 1970, insist on the importance of adjusting to the new needs of mission. This adjustment requires a “constant and sincere revision of our attitudes, activities and methods of work, in the light of the Gospel, in the context in which we are inserted, and in the kind of presence that is expected from us” (CA 1977:3). This is a relevant way of engaging in reflexivity because it includes Scripture, context, and indirectly, the local people too. The Acts of the Chapter of 1980 (Programming: Section 2 Evangelisation) also confirm the necessity for the Sisters to periodically verify the works to which they are committed, with the willingness to change attitudes and methods, if need be. The Rule of Life (RoL 1987 54.1) also emphasises this. Likewise, the Acts of the Chapter of 1998, acknowledge the need for a continuous revision of the methodology to be used in evangelisation (CA1998:57). An important emphasis appears in this statement, namely that, in evaluating the work done, one also needs to consider changes in oneself and in what is to be done. This is the fruit of a sound reflexivity.

In the light of the circular letter of Brambilla (7.12.2009 Prot. 494/09), an important breakthrough was made in 2010, with the realisation that it is vital “to allow ourselves to be evaluated by the communities, Churches and people we work with in our various ministries, thus encouraging a change of mentality” (CA 2010:23). Here, it is not simply a matter of self-critical reflection, but, rather of also extending reflexivity to an evaluation by others, which becomes a fundamental and essential dynamic for a sound reflexivity. This aspect is important for reflexivity, because the perspective of an outsider provides a unique contribution to the evaluation. An outsider, being a person who does not belong to the Congregation of the Sisters, can be more objective, seeing what the insider cannot or does not want to see, without being emotionally involved.

#### **4.5.7 The six dimensions of the spiral in one letter**

The letter of convocation of the General Chapter<sup>125</sup> that took place in 2016 came to me as a surprise, as the title for that General Chapter was *Daring the mystery of encounter in order to live Combonian mission today*. At that time, I had already elaborated the mission spirituality spiral, which revolves around *encounter*. Thus, for me, this letter came, as a confirmation that, in walking my path with the mission

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<sup>125</sup> The letter was written by the General Superior, Luzia Premoli and her General Council. The letter dated 14.9.2015 bears the Protocol number: Prot. VICG16/105/2015.

spirituality spiral, I was also in step with my Congregation on its journey, and, therefore, this also affirmed my sense of belonging to the Congregation of the Comboni Missionary Sisters.

In that letter, I found that the six elements of the spiral were present. The first ENCOUNTER presented is the one WITH CHRIST. From this everything else flows. Drawing on Comboni's ideas, the letter states that: "[b]y contemplating the great love of God, made visible in Jesus, Crucified, dead and Risen, he [Comboni] was able to gaze on and encounter Africa in a way which was different from his contemporaries." From encounter with God, encounter with Africa just flows. Likewise, it is "[t]hrough a true and deep personal encounter with Christ, Crucified and Risen, [that] our heart is transformed in such a way that we can meet our neighbour ... with reality [ENCOUNTER WITH THE CONTEXT] and with all that is created." Missionary life is made up of encounters which root us among the people we live among.

The letter does not mention CONTEXT ANALYSIS explicitly. Yet, it speaks of a "context of a globalized and pluralistic world, where we are challenged to cultivate and nurture the mystery of encounter," which signals the importance of context analysis, even if it does not engage in this in any depth.

SCRIPTURE is rightly described as "the story of the long and unending ENCOUNTER of God with humanity, prepared and made concrete in time and history" (capital letters in original). In Chapter Two, I argued that encounter with God is the core of mission and spirituality. This convocation letter refers to these encounters in Scripture, and says that they "are encounters in which we can contemplate the missionary pedagogy of Jesus by listening, dialogue, and by respecting the difference of others." Church documents are cited, and the conviction that daring the mystery of encounter is indispensable in order to face the challenges of mission today, while remaining faithful to the charism and the legacy of Comboni.

The term DISCERNMENT is not mentioned explicitly in the letter. However, the letter stresses that, being "attentive to the signs of times ... [and being attentive to] all that we have perceived throughout the journey of the Congregation, we must continue ... *'daring the Mystery of encounter,'* in order to be prophetic today as communities of consecrated Combonian women."

The letter engages with REFLEXIVITY by reviewing the previous six years: "we have been committed to weaving from our own spirituality, a prophetic lifestyle in today's world from the threads of our consecration and Combonian ministeriality." It,

then, questions whether, and to what extent, this prophetic lifestyle was visible in the Sisters' communities and in their apostolate. The positive contributions are acknowledged but there is still a long way to go "in order to achieve a style which responds more and more to the Word of God and to the thirst for life in abundance which we experience, together with the whole 'human family.'"

In this letter, it is evident that all the dimensions of the spiral are mentioned, to some extent, and that *encounter* serves as a common thread. Yet, the various dimensions do not seem to flow into one another – a sort of fragmentation seems to be present.

## 4.6 Concluding comments

Looking at the Comboni Missionary Sisters' spirituality and *ministeriality* through the lens of the mission spirituality spiral, it cannot go unnoticed that all of its six dimensions play an important role. As outlined in this chapter, these often appear in the official documents. At times, they are connected, but they are generally found in separate places. Occasionally, some dimensions can be found in one statement, but they do not seem to flow into one another. Therefore, one can get the impression that in the mission activity of the Sisters there exists a kind of fragmentation, a lack of interconnectedness between the dimensions. Also, a dichotomy between spirituality and action has been clearly identified in the synthesis of the workshops on *ministeriality* (Cristinelli 2013:359).

I propose that a way of overcoming this dichotomy or fragmentation can lie in the use of the mission spirituality spiral. I will expand on this proposal in Chapter Six.

In the next chapter I will focus on the analysis of the interviews with the fifteen Comboni Missionary Sisters.



# Chapter Five

## In dialogue with the Comboni Missionary Sisters

### 5.1 Introduction

Having looked at the life of the founder of the Comboni Missionary Sisters (Chapter 3) and the documents of the Congregation (Chapter 5), I now move on to analyse the views of a few living representatives of this missionary charism.

A charism, being a gift of the Spirit, has a dynamism in itself. Thus, it has to evolve and find new ways to be lived and expressed by those who follow in the footsteps of the one who had first received it. Each religious order certainly finds its identification in its foundation, and this has a special normative role. At the same time the foundation remains open to the future, therefore, “it is not in itself the *norma normans* but the *norma normata* of the life of the religious order” (Metz 1978:23). Just as following Christ does not merely mean imitating him, being a member of a religious order, and therefore, having received the charism of the founder, does not merely mean imitating him or her. Faithfulness to the charism requires continuously discussing it, considering the changing situations and demands and continuously discerning the *signs of the times* (:24). This means that the members of a religious order have to “persevere in the law of the radical following of Christ [and at the same time] continually scrutinize their way of life and their traditions by the touchstone of following Christ” (:25).

A charism is not an end in itself and is not something *private*, but it is at the service of the Church. It has to touch and affect the people to whom the holders of the charism are sent. In Chapter Four, I have explored the mission spirituality of the Comboni Missionary Sisters and it became clear that, over the years, the Sisters have committed themselves to live their charism in the footsteps of their founder, Daniel Comboni. The documents of the Congregation show that, in drawing on his charism, they reflected on it, seeking to discern a feminine way in which to live it, at the service of the Church and the world.

The interviews conducted with the Comboni Missionary Sisters were intended to explore to what extent they at present discern new ways of being in mission, in faithfulness to Comboni's charism and in living it in a feminine way.

Analysis of the interviews of fifteen Comboni Missionary Sisters has led me to structure this chapter by following the questions based on the mission spirituality spiral (1.7). **Spirituality** is the first dimension of the mission spirituality spiral. The Sisters draw on the mission spirituality of Daniel Comboni. Analysis of the interviews shows how they live this spirituality (5.6.1).

The second dimension of the spiral is **encounter with other(s)**. I analyse how the Sisters experience this encounter (5.2).

**Context analysis** – the third dimension of the spiral – corresponds to the sections in which the Sisters describe the context in which they live and operate (5.3) and the challenges that they encounter or have encountered in that same context (5.5).

The fourth dimension of the spiral is **theological reflection**: the encounter with Scripture and Tradition. In this section (5.6.2), I analyse how the Sisters relate to and interpret Scripture, the documents of the Church and spiritual authors.

**Discernment** for new ways of being in mission is the fifth dimension of the spiral. Although discernment seems, to a certain extent, to be lacking in the Congregation, the mission experience of the Sisters led them to formulate new ways in which they glimpse some potential for transformative mission (5.10).

The last dimension of the spiral is **reflexivity**. In this case too, the Sisters admit that evaluation does not seem to have a prominent place in the Congregation. Yet, the encounters with others and the context have brought forth transformation in their lives (5.4).

Part of this chapter also deals with the way the Sisters consider mission and spirituality and the relationship between these two realities (5.7). In another section (5.8), I explore the term *ministeriality*, according to the understanding of the Sisters. The emerging need of the Sisters for reflection on mission and spirituality also finds its place in this chapter (5.9).

I present the emerging aspects in the various sections hierarchically, that is, the first ones are the aspects that are named by a greater number of Sisters. I also present some aspects mentioned by individual Sisters that are relevant for the purpose of this research.



## 5.2 Encounter with ...

Encounter is an essential dimension for transformative mission and it plays an important role in the mission spirituality spiral. The spiral's dimensions are, in fact, based on encounter. Mission encounter is moved by the Spirit, is two-way, creative, transformative, and opts for the poor and excluded (1.10.4). From the interviews it emerges what the Sisters understand and intend by encounter with other(s) and otherness, and also how they live it.

A great deal of literature has been written about both *the other* and *otherness*. It is not the place here to explore it in detail. It suffices to recall that *the other* is “primarily understood as the other human being in his or her differences” (Bernasconi 1995) and “Otherness is the condition or quality of being different or ‘other.’” (Miller 2008:588).

When someone talks of *others*, he/she may risk labelling *them* as different from *him/her*. This may lead to making them “other” in a negative sense. Schreiter (1992:52-53) identifies seven ways of such negative *other-making*: One can *demonise*, *romanticise*, *colonise*, *generalise*, *trivialise*, *homogenise*, or *vaporise* the other. All this, for Schreiter, calls out for reconciliation.

When the fear of the *other* – which is part of human experience – becomes fear of his or her characteristics, what follows is the creation of division according to differences. As *difference* is a natural or moral category, one can easily slip into the negative habit of *other-making*. *Uniqueness* instead “belongs to the level of personhood” (Zizioulas 2006:69). Human beings owe their uniqueness to the fact that they are *imago Dei*. In a certain way, what makes the “difference” is not the natural or moral qualities of a person, but his or her particular and unique relationship in which a certain “other” is singled out as uniquely “Other” (:70). Thus, *otherness*, *defines* a human being, in the sense that his or her identity emerges when he/she establishes *unique* relations to other beings, God, the animals and the rest of creation. “When unique relations generate or involve otherness, this otherness is not difference but uniqueness” (:70).

In the encounter with otherness as uniqueness, fear necessarily disappears and the person who is encountered becomes a neighbour, a sister, a brother. At this point it is important to recall – as already explained earlier (3.4.2) – that Comboni did not consider Africans as *others* in a negative way. He saw “an infinite multitude of brothers

[and Sisters] who belonged to the same family as himself with one common Father in heaven” (The Plan 1871, in *Writings*:2742). In his footsteps, the Sisters are called to encounter *otherness* as uniqueness.

### 5.2.1 Encountering otherness

All the Sisters interviewed indicate the importance of *staying with* the people, of being a presence. It involves a particular way of *staying with* the people and one Sister, who is European and was working in Africa, describes this as being “... one of them, one among them, nothing special, without any superiority complex ... with a listening attitude ...” (PD 9). To *stay with* becomes particularly important when there is a sense of powerlessness in face of the difficult situations in which people live and so “we must stay there with them” – states PB (4) an African Sister who is serving in mission in Africa. PI (3, 9-10), who worked for many years in various countries, also stresses the importance of *staying with* people, especially when people are sick and are suffering. Thus, for PM (3), a European Sisters who worked in Latina America and Europe, at times, it literally means “just staying with” without doing anything. PJ (2), a European Sister who worked in Africa and is now serving in Europe, describes it as the “beauty of the encounter, not much of doing ... To stay with them, to know, to align myself with them, and to know their needs.”

It is a priority for the Sisters to visit people, to stay with them and to listen to them. This allows them to build positive relationships, where there are difficult and, at times, dangerous situations. For example, PG – a Latin American Sisters who served in Africa and is now back in her country (Mexico) – mentions the situation of violence caused by drug consumers and dealers on the streets where she and her community live. Precisely because of their *staying with*, and *listening to*, “a different relationship with these neighbours is being generated ... we are starting to create relationships” (PG 7). *Staying with* enhances the building of durable and meaningful relationships (PF 1-2; PA 7-8; PC 4).

In this *staying with* the people, PA (8), a European Sister who worked in Africa and is now in Europe, also sees the relationship between God and the people: “... you understand also a God who is among people, a God whom people can really ... see and experience as a God of life” (PA 8).

When encountering otherness, the Comboni Missionary Sisters, in the footsteps of Comboni, give priority to the *poorest and most abandoned*. This is not optional, but a mandate for the Sisters. It may be economic poverty (PC 3, 5; PO 1, 4; PL 3; PD 2), poverty due to sickness (PK 12; PI 2), due to marginalisation (PN 7; PG 1-4), or due to the fact that some people “are considered as the last” (PB 5). To give priority to the poor also leads the Sisters to choose to move to poorer areas. For example, PF (1) – a Latin American Sister who served in mission in Africa and is now back in Latin America – and her community have decided to move to the periphery of the capital city.

Human suffering is a recurring experience in the encounters of the Sisters (PG 2, 4; PF 2; PN 2; PI 2; etc.). Relating the encounters with people sentenced to death, PD (2) states: “it was the first time that I approached so closely the human drama, the human suffering.” PL is a European Sister who served in mission in Africa, the USA, and now is back in her country of origin. For her, encounter enables her to get in touch with the suffering of women: “I come to know their stories ... and their stories [of] ... long pain, long suffering, violence they suffered ... being marginalized” (PL 3).

Encountering otherness implies an attitude of respect towards the person (PG 8; PK 16).<sup>126</sup> “I had, first of all, to enter the culture and the relationships with a lot of respect,” admits PA (5). Self-disclosure needs time, and the person needs to be respected in that unfolding (PL 4). It also takes time to come to know situations and persons and to enter into a relationship. On this journey it is important to remember that encountering otherness means to “enter into something that is mysterious” (PE 8), according to PE, who is an African Sister serving in mission in Africa. A person is a mystery, not (merely) because he/she is the sum of various parts (culture, manners, customs, beliefs, etc.), but because he/she is “a unique image of God” (Karecki 2000:3). Awe and wonder are therefore the necessary attitudes to have before such a living mystery that each person is.

PI, a European Sister, is a nurse by profession and has had a long experience in mission. Now in her 80s, she states: “It is not what you say, but what you are for others ... and so it is important to be more attentive to the person” (PI 7). Presence and attention to the person are therefore essential for encounter.

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<sup>126</sup> Luzbetak indicates the three basic principles that have to be taken up especially in mission. He states: “(1) respect the individual person as an *individual*; (2) in fact, respect the person as an *important* individual; and (3) respect and treat this important individual as a *friend*” (Luzbetak 1988:323).

Trust in people is another essential attitude for encounter. PA (1) experienced being trusted by the youth, with whom she was working. This led her to develop the same kind of trust (PA 10). PB (4) likewise experienced the trust given to her by the people.

To trust people and their abilities can enhance changes in people. PG became aware of this when she listened to how two homeless ladies changed their life when a lawyer and a priest “put their trust in them and provided them with the needed means ... and they responded to this trust” (PG 6). When PM, after some years, went back to the place, where she had worked at a school, she met some of her former colleagues. The experience of being trusted by the Sister affected her colleagues who now say: “... thank you, because you trusted us” (PM 4). The question “to what extent do I trust ... the people I work with?” (PF 10) is at this point legitimate. Some Sisters also stress the importance of trusting the Sisters in their own religious community. They point out that trust is however lacking in some cases (PD 13; PA 15).

Three Sisters (PD 12; PC 5, 11; PK 6, 16) speak of *prossimità* (proximity, closeness).<sup>127</sup> PC is a European Sister who has been serving in mission in Latin America for several years. For her, *prossimità* means making *common cause* with the poor and abandoned. It means to be present “when there is a problem, a difficulty and to have the courage to face it together with the people ...” (PC 5). PC (11) and PD (12) also speak of *prossimità* as a new way of being in mission, on which I will expand later in this chapter (5.10.3). *Prossimità* is the term that PK uses to indicate the closeness that she is called to have to disoriented people – especially youth – in Italy: “the Italian context ... requires a lot of *prossimità* ... The youth ask for it ...” (PK 6). She also experiences the relevance of living *prossimità* especially with those persons who face big problems, and “I see that this, in some way, heals ...” (PK 7). PK is a European Sister who served in mission in Africa and is now working in her country of origin.

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<sup>127</sup> This term is often used by Pope Francis in his homilies and documents. *Evangelii Gaudium*, for example (EG 169, 171) speaks of this *prossimità*. The term is rendered here in English with *closeness*. In his address to the Religious for the Jubilee of consecrated life, Pope Francis sees closeness to the others to be one of the three pillars for consecrated life. The term also appears in the *Message of the Fifth General Conference to the Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean*, in the *Aparecida Document* of 2007. The Bishops declare: “We commit to strengthen our presence and proximity.” In the *Aparecida Document* the term *cercanía* (proximity, closeness) appears seven times and it refers to both the closeness of God to people and the closeness that the faithful need to have to others. Francis was, at that time, one of the Bishops who wrote the *Aparecida Document*. It should therefore not surprise that this *cercanía*, to which the Bishops committed, is now important in his pontificate.

Although most of the Sisters do not use this term, it appears clear that they consider closeness to people of paramount importance for mission. Closeness (or *prossimità*) to people helps to create the ability of *empathy* that is “the capacity for participation in the local community’s feelings” and for understanding and appreciating their way of behaving (Luzbetak 1988:215). The importance of *empathy* in mission certainly cannot be questioned. But this means neither unconditional approval of a culture with all its customs and traditions nor compromising the Gospel (:161). In the Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Paul VI emphasises that evangelisation has to transform all the strata of cultures (EN 19), that is, “every effort must be made to ensure a full evangelization of culture, or more correctly of cultures. They have to be regenerated by an encounter with the Gospel” (EN 20). A further insight, in this regard, is given by John Paul II (1982:8) in his address to the First National Congress of the Ecclesial Movement of Cultural Commitment: “A faith that does not become culture is a faith not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived.”

The Catholic bishops, in 1886, confirmed that “the church must never allow herself to be absorbed by any culture, since not all cultural expressions are in conformity with the gospel” (TEE 44). And Pope John Paul II, in *Redemptoris missio* affirms that the process of inculturation “must in no way compromise the distinctiveness and integrity of the Christian faith” (RM 52). It must also be remembered that not everything in a culture is good. In fact, every culture entails some things that might even need to be denounced as evil and, therefore, be eradicated from that culture (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:388).

### **5.2.2 Two-way encounter**

In Chapter One (1.10.4), I described encounter as a two-way movement, in which both interlocutors are interacting as subjects, listening to each other, enriching each other, and creating new perspectives. This two-way movement emerges clearly from the interviews. The kind of encounter the Sisters experience with others is two-way, to give and to receive. This is a learning process for them and the people they live among. “I go to share with people. It is to give and to receive,” says PM (12).

Some Sisters are enriched by the example of the people they encounter. Recalling the example of a man who used to read the gospel (although he could hardly read)

before going to work in the field and meditate upon it while hoeing, PC (3) states: “these are things that shake and evangelise you. You receive much more than you give.”

Through a relationship with a person who has come back to faith, PN (2) is challenged to revisit her own faith motivations. PN is a European Sister who worked in a Latin American country and has now been working for several years in her country of origin.

PF (4) received an example of faith from a lay couple. Through a genuine encounter, one learns to receive trust from the others (PA 6) and to “receive with humility” (PE 3). GS recognises that from the people she was working with “I could also receive ... they were also my teachers ... teaching me, a European, a foreigner, how to be more open, to become a Sudanese.”

That learning process, which strongly featured in the life of Comboni, is thus clearly of paramount importance for these Sisters too. PF (2) recalls how the youth welcomed her and introduced her to and taught her about their culture. It does not matter who the other is; what is important, is to be open to receive, and to learn from others. In fact, “at times, the poor, the excluded, are those who teach you” (PK 6). One, first of all, “looks, observes, and welcomes all that people have to offer ... because they have much to offer” (PD 9).

The importance of mutual giving and receiving also appears in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Paul VI. PO (7) recalls it: “The [primary] concept of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* is dialogue ... You receive, you give, and you receive.”

As indicated earlier, trust received and given is essential. Moreover, when encounter takes place between interlocutors interacting at the same level in a *give-and-receive* dynamic, and without any sense of superiority or inferiority, empowerment is enhanced. PG (7) recalls the example of two homeless women, cited above: “They [lawyer and priest] empowered them to walk by themselves ... It is possible to change.”<sup>128</sup> PG and the Sisters of her community want to do the same by providing the necessary means and by putting trust in the people, in the certainty that transformation and change are possible.

Openness to learning from the people, recognising that people have their own resources, and trusting that they know the reality better than she does, allowed PK to collaborate with and to empower the marginalised. The establishment of a cooperative,

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<sup>128</sup> Luzbetak (1988:322) is clear on the possibility of change. The involvement of *individuals* is the only way by which the Gospel can be introduced and socioeconomic change can be brought about.

managed and led by them, with the support of the Sister, is the result of this empowerment (PK 5-6).

Empowerment is, therefore, the result of a sound encounter. The same applies to collaboration with local people, the Church and social institutions (PL 1), with the Comboni family<sup>129</sup> (PM 13; PC 1, 7) and at the inter-congregational level. One example of inter-congregational collaboration is provided by a project “that took to South Sudan religious and laity from all over the world” (PL 2). Collaboration helps to relativise one’s own way of doing things and being enriched by learning from others. PF also experiences collaboration with other religious congregations in a program started by the USIG (International Union of Superior Generals) in the area of formation, as something “that gave me more life” (PF 2).

### 5.2.3 Encounter with ... : Concluding comments

This section of the chapter recounts how the Sisters live encounter in mission. They express the importance of *staying with* the people, especially the *poorest and most abandoned*, with attitudes of respect, trust, and closeness.

They live the two-way movement of encounter as a *give-and-receive*, which implies learning from others, from the persons they work with, not out of any sense of superiority. This listening and learning approach is what Barbour (1984:303-304) called “mission-in-reverse.” Barbour (:305) describes it:

When ministry is seen as dialogical, it means that ministers become persons immersed in the world of others, like Jesus was in our world. It is *with* people, therefore, that the minister begins to ask questions; it is *with* people that basic human values are endorsed or challenged; and it is this context that shapes the way of announcing the good news and of denouncing sinful structures.

Collaboration and empowerment are clearly fruits of a sound mission encounter.

From the above discussion, it emerges that the kinds of encounters lived by the Sisters interviewed, bear the qualities of the mission encounter described in the mission spirituality spiral (1.10.4; 2.4.2.2). This opens the possibility for the Comboni Missionary Sisters of making good use of the mission spirituality spiral.

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<sup>129</sup> The *Comboni family* includes the Comboni Missionary Sisters, the Comboni Fathers and Brothers, the Secular Comboni Women Missionaries, and the Comboni Lay Missionaries.

In this thesis the mission spirituality spiral plays a double role: as an analytical and as a mobilising tool. In the two preceding chapters I used the spiral as an analytical tool, in order to study the mission spirituality of Comboni (3.5) and of the Comboni Missionary Sisters (4.5). In Chapter Six I will use it as a mobilising tool.

What is evident from the interviews is that encounter and relationship with others are most important. They actually endure. It is not so much the projects or what is done that people will remember, but rather how encounter and relationship have been lived (LS 13).

Pope Francis made *encounter* the dominant theme of his Pontificate. In his speeches and homilies he often speaks of *Culture of Encounter*. In the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG 87), he sees the challenge and, at the same time, the need for all Christians

of finding and sharing a “mystique” of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage.

Pope Francis continues emphasising that encounter is essential in the life of Christians, who have to learn and have “to help others to learn how to encounter others with the right attitude, which is to accept and esteem them as companions along the way, without interior resistance” (EG 91). In this sense, encounter is more important than anything else. This kind of encounter necessarily leads to commit oneself for the good of the people.

At this point we can speak of encounter as an embrace. We have seen above that Pope Francis speaks of “embracing and supporting one another” (EG 87), and also Comboni in his Plan (1871, in *Writings*:2742) speaks of the Catholic who “would enclose in his arms in an embrace of peace and of love” the Africans who are to him brothers and sisters. Thus, it seems appropriate to introduce here the metaphor of *embrace* by Volf (1996). It can be of help for the Sisters in their encounters with people in mission. Volf’s metaphor of embrace consists in living four moments: opening the arms, waiting, closing the arms, and opening them again.

By *opening the arms*, one opens his/her door, creates a space for the other and invites the other (Volf 1996:141-142). By *waiting* one respects the other’s boundaries. One has to wait until the other also has the desire to embrace. Reciprocity is therefore



required (:142-143). The next step, *closing the arms*, reaches a complete reciprocity because both embrace. At this stage, the host is a guest, and the guest is the host. Here “the identity of the self is both preserved and transformed, and alterity of the other is both affirmed as alterity and partly received into the ever changing identity of the self” (:143). In this third step, there is no need to understand the other on the self’s own terms. The other remains a question (:144) or, in other words, a *mystery* (Karecki 2000:3). Finally, the *opening of the arms again*. This last gesture makes it clear that there cannot be a fusion of the two persons. One cannot disappear into the other. One has to let the other go so that his/her alterity and identity are preserved (Volf 1996:144). In this letting the other go, one can also identify the desire of empowering the other and of not making him/her dependent.

On the one hand, the embrace metaphor emerges to a certain extent from the analysis of the interviews. On the other hand, it needs to be deepened by the Sisters in their encounters in mission.

### **5.3 Analysing the context**

Analysis of the context is the next dimension on the mission spirituality spiral. It means critical analysis of the social, political, historical, economic, and ecclesial situation of the context (2.4.2.3), which allows us to comprehend and analyse the reality in which people live.

#### **5.3.1 Context analysis: Socio-political, economic and ecclesial**

Included in the interviews was the request to describe the context in which the Sisters are living or in which they had earlier lived. The reason for raising this question was to stimulate participants to reflect on the context in which they live and work and to verify if, and how, this had an impact on them. It needs to be stressed that as the question only required a description of context, some of the Sisters limited the description to the place where they live. Others expanded their descriptions to the region or entire country. The quality of the description given varies from Sister to Sister. In fact, for some of them it is very brief and is limited to the context of their religious community (PI 1; PE 1).

A description of context does not automatically imply a critical analysis of its socio-political, historical, economic and ecclesial situation. PG (1), for instance, accurately describes the area where she and her community live. She highlights the existing social and economic problems, but does not seek to identify the causes of such problems.

A brief description of a country that includes the relationship among various religions is provided by PO (1). In this case, the description is not an in-depth one. Four Sisters were able to give a more extensive analysis of the country in which they live (PK 1; PD 1; PC 1, PA 1-2). PK and PD manage to identify what underlies the situation behind the war in the country concerned. PD (1) gives a fairly good analysis of the socio-political instability and the resulting violence in the country: “We believe that the main cause is the management of resources.” Another fairly good analysis of context, with causes and resulting consequences, is offered by PC (1). She also includes a fairly good description of the ecclesial situation. It is also worth mentioning how PC discovered the need for a pastoral health outreach. This resulted not because of an in-depth ecclesial analysis; rather, it came about by chance. When visiting a person in hospital, a doctor told her: “You Catholics should be ashamed ... Here, you see only Protestants who visit the sick. You do not see Catholics” (PC 7). She experienced this comment as “a slap in the face” – a wake-up call. She and a Comboni Father then started to organise a Health Pastoral Care Program, by visiting the sick in hospital. From the interview it is not clear to which denomination that doctor belongs, and whether her remark to the Sister points to comparison or competition between churches. In any case, the relationship between churches needs to be reflected on in every mission context, “not [as] a passive and semi-reluctant coming together but [as] an active and deliberate living and working together” (Bosch 1991:464). For this to happen, the concept of *inter gentes*, with which I dealt earlier in the thesis (2.2.1.8), has to be increasingly taken into consideration.

PA indicates that the continuously growing number of people from the rural areas flooding into the city, “causes a lot of social problems. You can see them every day” (PA 1). She mentions some of these problems, and also highlights some of the causes (PA 2).

Short descriptions of the ecclesial situation in which the Sisters live, are provided by PN (1), PO (1), PF (1), and PM (1). These are however descriptions that cannot be considered in-depth analyses of causes and consequences.

### 5.3.2 Discovering a reality different from the one expected

Those embarking on mission generally have personal expectations. Once they arrive at the place assigned to them, they realise that things are different from what they had expected. The Sisters do receive training before being sent to a specific country, but like all people who enter a different culture, they too are affected by *culture shock*. The term *culture shock* was coined by the mission anthropologist Oberg (1960). He describes it as the “anxiety that results from losing all of our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (1960:177). Luzbetak defines it as “the inability of an individual enculturated for a given physical, social, and ideational environment to adjust comfortably and more or less spontaneously to another environment” (1988:203).<sup>130</sup>

Oberg supports the U-curve hypothesis of intercultural adjustment that was attributed to Lysgaard (1955). It describes the process of adjustment that a person undergoes when she lives in an environment that differs from the one in which she grew up. The 4 phases of this adjustment are: *euphoria* or *tourist stage* or *honeymoon* (positive excitement when arriving in a new environment); *discomfort* or *disenchantment* (deriving from unexpected and often negative experiences in the new environment); *acculturation* or *stage of resolution* (the learning process of adaptation to that environment); and the final stage, *adjustment*, that is achieved if the acculturation process is accomplished successfully and the person feels relatively comfortable in the new environment (Lysgaard 1955:45-51; Oberg 1960:177-182; Luzbetak: 1988: 219-221; Szkudlarek 2010:3; Maude 2011:183-187).

Four Sisters express the experience of culture shock in some way, but do not go deeply into that. They admit that the idea they had of mission was more of an ideal that did not correspond to the reality they encountered. PD (9) admits: “I thought very naively that one was going on mission to save the others ... but arriving on the spot I discovered the potential and the richness of the people that welcomed me. They put me

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<sup>130</sup> Luzbetak (1988:203-214) explores the nature, the causes, the symptoms and problems correlated. Berry, while acknowledging the concept *culture shock*, prefers to use the concept *acculturative stress* because “it is closely linked to psychological models of stress” and therefore “has some theoretical foundation.” Moreover, the term “‘shock’ suggests the presence of only negative experiences and outcomes of intercultural contact” and lastly “the source of the problems that do arise are not cultural, but intercultural, residing in the process of acculturation” (Berry 1997:3). In their book *Culture Shock: Psychological reactions to unfamiliar environments*, Furnham and Bochner (1986) engage with a deep and extensive interdisciplinary and critical study of culture shock but do not engage with the category of missionaries, except marginally because “little has been written about them” (:226).

in my place.” PB (5) also had her fantasies about mission, but “life is not that,” she says, smiling.

Likewise, PC (4) was dreaming of the country to which she was appointed and she had certain expectations. She comments: “Gosh! I dreamt of Brazil, but is this Brazil? Then I started to see differently.” Arriving at the country, PJ (8) realised that she had been looking at reality and the people from her own perspective. The people there helped her to look at reality in a different way.

### **5.3.3 Analysing the context: Concluding comments**

Analysis of the interviews shows quite clearly that encountering and analysing (a new) context is not easy, because individuals have their own ideals and ideas of what they might expect there. They are faced by culture shock and have to try to reach an adjustment. It has to be kept in mind that cultural determinants may either limit or enable the perception and the interpretation of that encounter (Skreslet 2012:77). When encountering the context and doing context analysis, one must be open to involve the local Christian community, because it is the “*primary agent* involved in incarnating the Gospel” together with the Holy Spirit, “not the sending church or the universal Church” (Luzbetak 1988:70; cf. Holland & Henriot 1983:16).

From the analysis of the interviews one may have the impression that the Sisters do not engage with in-depth context analysis where they live and serve. This may lay in the fact that the question pointed only to the description of that context. I have to admit that with regard to context analysis I did not probe deep enough in the interviews. A direct question about whether the Sisters do context analysis or not, and how they do it, would have certainly given greater insights to the research.

In Chapter Four, where I explored how the Sisters deal with context analysis in their official documents (4.5.3), it emerged that in the past two Acts of the Chapters (2010 and 2016) not much emphasis has been put on the need for the Sisters to do a serious context analysis where they live and minister. This might have (negatively) influenced the way of being in mission of the Sisters. I also find myself among them. Although I consider context analysis to be an important dimension in the mission spirituality spiral, I myself have not deeply engaged with it, both in the context where I

live and minister, and during the interviews with the Sisters. This shows that the Congregation, as well as I, need to take it up seriously.

What is clear from the interviews, however, is that encounter within context and the people living in that context, brings about transformation. I now turn my attention to this.

## **5.4 Encounter leads to personal transformation**

Genuine encounter does not leave the person as she was before that encounter. It leads to a personal transformation. All the Sisters acknowledge that some transformations of their way of perceiving God and reality took place. This, in turn, led to new approaches to prayer and liturgy and even to new lifestyles. This personal transformation experienced by the Sisters is part of reflexivity (2.4.2.6).

### **5.4.1 New perceptions of God**

A good number of the Sisters interviewed recognise that the experience of encounter with people and the context fostered a new perception of God in them.

Both PD and PC discovered a more human God. PD perceived that the face of God was changing, but it took time before recognising that “God has taken on a more human face ... God has facial features of men and women ... It is as if God is the people ... A God, who lives inside the people, and a people that live close to God ... The face of a more human God” (PD 5). This change of her perception of God occurred in Africa, in a context completely different from the European one from which the Sister came.

The encounter with simple people,<sup>131</sup> led PC (4) to go back to the essentials of the Gospel, and “to seek not many things ... but in the simplicity and humility, also because God is like this. A God for us, in our midst and, therefore, you feel much more a human God.” Touched by the simplicity of the people who live around her, and by the simplicity of the martyrs of Uganda, PE (3) states: “I see simplicity all around me ... This God near me and is simple in Himself [sic]. God is not complicated.”

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<sup>131</sup> The adjective *simple*, for the Sisters, indicates ordinary, unpretentious, uncomplicated, humble persons, who often live in poor conditions. It is not considered by them in a derogatory way. It has no negative connotation for them (PC 2; PH 1; PN 3; PE 3; PA 14).

For PG, the discovery of a God who is present in the people finds its roots in the encounter with migrants, who try to cross the border to reach the USA. These people are often “kidnapped [she sighs], menaced, hit, wounded ... But they say: ‘God was there, with us.’ ... They see God in people” (PG 7). She recognises that these immigrants taught her to “discover God in all ... in persons. God is there, God is there ...” (PG 7). A similar experience is recounted by PH, who has witnessed how God works in the Sisters she was training. From her encounters and relationships with these young Sisters, as well as with the older Sisters, she “can see that God is present in all” (PH 2).

Through the many encounters with the Sisters in the Province she leads, PH felt compelled to reflect on the presence of God in her life. The patience she must have with the Sisters, made her discover “a God who is more patient” (PH 3).

Her experience in an African country, made PJ discover “the beauty of the encounter with God that I did not know before. This was through nature and especially through the simplicity of gestures ... the simplicity of the celebrations and of the people I encountered. A God, Creator, who ... came close ... became one of us and has walked with us, with the people” (PJ 3). PA (6) has gained an “image of God who is for all, who is prayed to, together with the community ... the church at large.”

### **5.4.2 New approach to prayer and liturgy**

A genuine approach to context and its people led the Sisters to new images and experiences of God. As a result, prayer and liturgy also found new ways of expression. Three Sisters stress the fact that the context in which they lived led them to a more contemplative prayer. PO is a European Sister who served many years in mission in the Middle East. She also had the possibility of visiting all the Provinces of the Congregation. The desert of a country in the Middle East awakened in her the “necessity of a space of silence and a space of contemplation” (PO 4). By that she means “the contemplation, first of all, of the situation” (4). This made her prayer “more ... embedded in the reality” (5).

The natural environment where PN lived, affected her way of praying. There, in the middle of the forest, she experienced enjoying silence and contemplation (PN 5). At the same time, the strong popular religiosity of the place seemed to be in contradiction to this new dimension of contemplation. Moreover, there was a popular theology, which

focused on the Word, adapted to the language of the people (PN 5). All this helped her to find the meaning of her missionary life that became “less adventurous, less on the front line” (PN 5). With this statement it seems that PN distances herself from the idea of mission as only *doing* and embraces mission as *being*.

From the people GS learnt a new way of praying. From the way people were “relating to God ... their being there ... I learnt the way of staying with God ... to be there ... I think I have learnt from them the real meaning of adoration ... to be silent” (PL 5). She felt it was a call to grow in intimacy with God, through contemplative prayer, to which she is now committed.

A new way of praying with the Word of God is reported by PJ (3-4) and PK (7-8). Both were affected by the way the people prayed in a simple way with the Word. The Sisters also began to pray with the Word in a simpler way. For instance, PJ passed from a structured way of reading it to “a less structured way ... through listening to the reality, to listening to the Word of God that was giving answers or, at times, was leaving me feeling disquieted” (PJ 3-4).

In most cases the Sisters emphasise that prayer is touched by the reality, by the situations in which they live with the people (PG 9; PI 8; PM 6; PO 3; PD 5; PJ 4; PF 3).

Also, the celebration of the Eucharist now has new connotations. For some Sisters, the celebration of the Eucharist has become a real feast (PG 9), in which “the Word becomes incarnate in the people, with all these ... situations ... of poverty, injustice ... situations where God is already there” (PF 3).

The Eucharistic celebration is a community celebration. But, it was only in her first mission experience in a country in Africa that PA realised how much this community dimension is important: “... I was very self-sufficient in my faith ... Now I feel the support from the community and feel connected to the community” (PA 6).

To this, PJ (4) adds that the Eucharistic celebration is a way of celebrating life. This applies also to PD (5), who states that the Eucharistic celebration becomes “the experience of the Paschal mystery ... where death and life meet, but ... life has anyway defeated death.” In this sense it becomes a celebration of life, in which “the human and God have come close and one loses oneself in the other.” In the Eucharistic celebration, PO (4) has learnt to bring to the Lord the suffering of the people and the events of the day. In the Eucharistic celebration – the memorial of the suffering, death and

resurrection of Jesus – the suffering of the people can be more easily associated to that of Jesus and be brought to God in prayer.

### **5.4.3 New perception of reality**

Encounter with people and context also develops a new perception of reality. Encounter with marginalised people has led PG (9) to “approach the reality with a new sight, with the eyes of God.” At the beginning of her mission experience, PC (4) was disappointed by the reality that she was encountering. Although she does not explain the nature of her disappointment, the reasons may lay in the fact that she defines herself as “very dogmatic, *structured*,” whilst the context and the people required more flexibility and acceptance of what was different from her ideas (PC 4). Later, through encounter and relationship with the people, she slowly started to “see reality with new eyes.” A similar experience is recounted by PJ, who started “to see the reality with different eyes, with more attentive eyes ...” (PJ 8). The experience of the two Sisters can be considered as an epistemological conversion.

Through encounter with street children, PD (3) “was shocked how easily we can become indifferent, how we can get used to indifference and consider even the most terrible things to be normal.”

PN, who is working in an area not far from where she grew up, realised that encounter with people coming from other continents changed, as it were, her perception of that reality. She considers these people as an instrument for her to give expression to her missionary vocation (PN 12).

In a different way PA (7), by encountering the suffering of the people, has realised that, far from being fatalist, she can now accept the reality of the situations. She says: “I don’t have the answers for everything, and I am not even asked to have them.” Thus, she can look at the reality, and the difficult situations that arise from it “with that capacity of trust that has grown; to trust in God that it is OK. You can go through.”

PA expresses here a very important dimension of mission spirituality: trust in God. In the face of the many challenges in mission, if faith and trust in God lessen, one risks falling into pessimism and fatalism. Trust in God allows one to serenely live and face commitments, adversities, the impossibility of addressing all the needs of the people, and even failures, without resignation or fatalism. Pope John XXIII (1962), in



his address for the opening of the Second Vatican Council, called the faithful to this trust:

Present indications are that the human family is on the threshold of a new era. We must recognize here the hand of God, who, as the years roll by, is ever directing men's [sic] efforts, whether they realize it or not, towards the fulfilment of the inscrutable designs of His providence, wisely arranging everything, even adverse human fortune, for the Church's good.

#### **5.4.4 New lifestyle**

Personal transformation resulting from encounter has also affected the lifestyle of the Sisters. Living in a context, where everything is reduced to essentials, and life is very simple and sober, not full of things, helped PD to "enter into contact with life" (PD 2), and thus to experience the need to live soberly and limited to what is essential. A similar experience of transformation due to contact with poverty was recounted by PE. She had to revise her life by making certain choices in her use of things (PE 2). Likewise, PF, challenged by the poverty in which people are living, feels urged to reflect on her vow of poverty: "When I have to buy something I always ask myself if I really need it. There is always a reference to the persons who cannot afford it" (PF 4).

The encounter with context and people also developed a desire to witness to one's faith. For example, PI (5), living in a Muslim environment, experienced a deeper desire of staying with the people there, recognising them as "children of God" (PI 3) and, at the same time, to be a humble witness to the faith that characterises her life, through service to the sick in hospital. Thus, Muslims came to recognise her and the other Sisters as "women of God" (PI 2).

Exposure to other Christian denominations in Africa, and the experience of praying together at funerals or celebrations, have increased PA's own faith. She experienced a transformation in a sense that she is now able to witness to her faith in her own country, including to her friends who are agnostic (PA 10-11).

Other kinds of transformation in life are recounted by PC (4), who has become freer to accept diversity. PE also has become a person who can accept and welcome the other: "I feel that there is more space in myself to welcome another person" (PE 3). She also realised that "there are many ways of seeing the thing or of interpreting the same experience ...," and this made her "more flexible" (PE 8).

Looking at the reality and at people with new eyes, enabled PJ (8) “to recognise the details ... to enter into the particulars, to give space to the small things, to that moment ...” Her *Western frenzy* was transformed into a slowing down, becoming able “to savour moment by moment” (PJ 8). She had, as it were, to reset herself.

After many years of mission experience, PO perceived the necessity for her to “be a servant and not to be a *protagonist*” (PO 8).

In the interviews I found that the words *protagonist* and *protagonism* have a negative connotation for the Sisters, because they understand it as referring to someone who takes the centre stage, who stands out, who is a *hero*, who has all the solutions to problems, who is indispensable. The Sisters want to avoid this kind of *protagonism*. Therefore, they emphasise the importance of *staying with* and *close to* people (*prossimità*). They call for a listening and accompanying attitude, for simplicity, for empowering people, and for working together without any sense of superiority. These attitudes are recognised as important ways of being in mission (5.10).

#### **5.4.5 Encounter leads to transformation: Concluding comments**

Personal transformation is the fruit of genuine mission encounters, as is clearly shown by the above analysis of the interviews. Although the transformation is personal, it does not mean that it is *private*. When one undergoes a personal transformation, this also changes one’s ways of being in mission; therefore, mission activities are also affected by new perceptions of reality, people and God. In turn, mission can become transformative.

PH is a Latin American Sister who worked in Africa and then returned to Latin America to train Sisters. She states that the encounter with them “helps to review what you have lived, and then say: how can I live now? Should I return to Africa, my attitude will be different” (PH 6) and this will also affect the mission activities she will be involved in.

A final word on encounter: All the Sisters recognised how relevant encounter with others and the context is. Most essentially, however, “the person is important” (PM 6; PF 4). Other things are relative and, therefore, “everything depends on the way I encounter others” (PG 8).

## 5.5 Challenges

Life is always accompanied by challenges and mission is certainly not exempted from them. The transformations that occurred in the Sisters stemmed, to a certain extent, from being challenged by the encounter with people or the context. In the interviews I explicitly requested the Sisters to name the challenges they encountered, or are encountering, in the context in which they live. I have grouped the responses that I found into five categories, dealing respectively with discernment, powerlessness, language and cultures, change, and disorientation. I discuss each of these challenges in turn.

### 5.5.1 Discernment

Discernment is an essential dimension in the mission spirituality spiral. It aims to find new ways of being in mission (2.4.2.5). The Sisters experience it also as a challenge.

After her interview PF asked me why I did not ask a question on discernment. At that moment I was lost for an answer. I now realise that such a question could have been beneficial to the research, and the research might have gained in quality. Discernment was, however, stated by a number of Sisters to be a challenge in their life and in mission. Only two Sisters mentioned how discernment was present in their life. PN says: “The contemplative dimension helped me ... in times of discernment on myself and on others” (PN 5). Discernment is to her a spiritual endeavour. For PL, it seems that discernment is a constant presence in her life: “I always try to check these new ways with someone ... to discern and say: Am I on the right way or am I going astray?” (PL 8).

Discernment reveals itself to be also a *new way* of being in mission. But, at this stage, I confine myself to examining how the Sisters, explicitly or implicitly, consider it a challenge.

It was a challenge to PK in helping Africans to understand that they were not required to renounce their cultural heritage merely in order to assume Western culture; she insisted that they had to discern what was to be kept of their own culture (PK 4).

It is a present challenge to PN “to understand what are the questions of ... people, the existential questions of these people; ... to what extent they realise this, or whether we can realise it together” (PN 4). Although PN does not mention the word discernment, it appears clear that the phrase “understand what” amounts to discernment.

PH also does not mention the word discernment. However, she considers the question: “how to respond to the needs of the people without creating a maternalistic bond” (PH 2) to be a challenge. This is a very relevant issue in missionary life. One needs to undergo a sound discernment to avoid those paternalistic or maternalistic attitudes that for a long time were present and, unfortunately, at times still are and have gone hand in hand with mission activities. As the title of Bonk’s book, *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem* (1991), well highlights, money brought by Western missionaries has often created problems of a paternalistic or maternalistic nature. Money in mission generates, consciously or unconsciously, a sense of superiority, power and esteem in the missionary. Lack of money, on the other hand, creates a sense of inferiority, mistrust, envy and dependency amongst the people (Bonk 1991:45-58). The issue of money in mission is very evident. On the one hand, money is necessary to live and to work in mission. On the other hand, “there is often a great difference between what Western missionaries think they are communicating, and what their poorer listeners actually see, hear and believe” (:69-70). The debate about mission and money, especially from the West, is a very serious and difficult one. At this point I just recall the answer Br. Kipoy Pombo<sup>132</sup> gave to the question about how to find a balance in dealing with people’s needs. He says:

We still bear the consequences of a missionary reality that started many years ago. Today a small minority is becoming aware of it, but the majority still think that a missionary must be a banker because he/she is acting as a bridge between the local people and the organisations that provide money. (Kipoy 2013:184, my translation)

Another issue that I see emerging also in our Congregation, is the fact that more and more Sisters are native of Africa or Latin America. Many of these Sisters do not have access to benefactors who donate money. This might create a sort of tension between the Sisters who receive money from benefactors and those who do not. It might create a sense of superiority in some and inferiority in others.

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<sup>132</sup> Br. Kipoy Pombo is the Superior General of the Congregation of the *Josephite Brothers of Kinzambi* in the Democratic Republic of Congo. He is professor extraordinarius of Philosophical Anthropology and Metaphysic, and Traditional African Religions at the Pontifical University Urbaniana in Rome.

It was a surprise for me, participating at the General Chapter in 2016, to hear of the enormous importance that is given to projects to be done and the suggestion of establishing “a Development Office for projects which can generate income for ministerial projects” (CA 2016:19.3), which actually became a mandate<sup>133</sup> for the General Council (CA 2016:22.5a). This debate certainly goes beyond the intention of this research. However, the Congregation of the Comboni Missionary Sisters needs to face it, and discern – without denying that money is also necessary – about the kind of importance they want to give to projects.

The challenge as to “how and what spaces, different from those already existing in the neighbourhood, can be created” (PG 7), indicates the need for discernment.

PF, too, does not explicitly speak of discernment as a challenge. However, as she puts it, it appears to be a real challenge for the Comboni Missionary Sisters, in general. She remarks that “we are lacking in undergoing discernment in daily life, in the lifestyle ...” (PF 7). Toward the end of her interview, PF also mentions that the number of the Sisters in the congregation is diminishing and many are aging. “This kept us from daring something new. Then, we started to close communities ... but we did not dare to try something new with this our new reality ...,” and she attributes this to the fact that “at times, we lack something inside ourselves” (PF 12). She identifies this “something” with a spirituality that is the foundation of mission (PF 12), and with discernment (13).

The questioning by the Sisters about: how to respond to all the needs of the people (PH 2; PD 3; PF 3; PN 4; PB 4-5); how to be present as consecrated women (PD 4); how to reveal the spiritual side when engaging in activities (PD 12); how to remain faithful to the charism (PD 16); how to empower people (PA 15); what the presence of the Sisters has to mean (PJ 11); how to work by being inspired by the Gospel (PK 14); how to deal with death (PA 5); how to engage in mission animation (PM 5; PF 2); how *to make common cause* with the people (PO 3); etc., ultimately, amounts to questions of discernment.

So an analysis of the interviews shows that the need for discernment poses a daily challenge to the Comboni Missionary Sisters.

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<sup>133</sup> A mandate is a task that the General Chapter gives to the General Superior and her Council, or to a special commission, or to the Provinces, etc. to be implemented during the following six years.

### 5.5.2 Powerlessness

Another challenge emerging from the interviews is powerlessness in the face of very difficult situations of poverty, sickness and violence. PB (4) works at a dispensary. While, on the one hand she wishes to do everything she can to heal people, she is aware, on the other hand, that the dispensary is small and it is not equipped to treat every kind of disease. The sense of powerlessness before people who cannot be cured there is a great challenge for her.

PD (4) has also experienced a similar sense of powerlessness before the immense problems of a city of five million inhabitants. Both PD and PB offer a response to such a challenge: It is important to stay there, no matter what. For the Sisters, *staying with*, and *not leaving* a place because of difficulties or of danger, finds its roots in Comboni. He expected his missionaries “to consecrate themselves until death to work for the regeneration of Africa” (Rules 1871, in *Writings* 2654), and to have the same spirit of sacrifice that characterised his spirituality and his life without giving up (3.4.5).

Living in a “multi-ethnic context” (PN 1) where a high number of immigrants are struggling to make a living, PN says clearly that “a challenge ... is powerlessness” (PN 4). She is aware that her concern is “... to solve the problems of humanity. But, I do not have it in my hand.” The solution she offers is to listen to and to value each person.

This sense of powerlessness is expressed, in another context, by PA (5) in the face of deaths and the economic gap between poor and rich. She states: “You’d like to address so many needs. You’d like to give answers to so many needs ... And yet, I find myself ... with no answers for everything” (PA 7). I have described the solution PA gives to these challenges in the section on personal transformation (5.4.3).

It is interesting to note that the above-mentioned Sisters manage to find some way of responding to that sense of powerlessness experienced in concrete situations.

A missionary often has to deal with great challenges that cause a sense of helplessness and powerlessness. For Schreier (2001b:159-160), this sense of powerlessness led to the rediscovery of a contemplative dimension of mission spirituality, which is connected to *kenosis*, or self-emptying (Phil 2:4-8). *Kenosis*, being the exact opposite of human power, can only seek the “power of God manifested on the cross” (:160). Contemplating the presence of God in unlikely places and situations of powerlessness means to consent to the self-emptying of God and, at the same time, of

self. This “spirit of kenosis gives us our only hope” (Downey 2006:126). Through self-emptying and self-giving a new hope comes into being by the gift of God and not by one’s own efforts.

It is this spirituality of powerlessness, or *kenosis*, that leads the missionary – if he/she remains open to others and to God – to continuous conversion and self-transformation, and therefore, to bring about transformation in the society (Banawiratma 2005:102).

### **5.5.3 Languages and cultures**

On arrival in a new country or continent, one has to engage in a process of learning the language and the culture of the context in question. Those who have experienced that process say that it is generally quite a challenge. This is particularly true if one has to go and work in various countries within the space of a few years. I can say that from experience. In fact, I spent almost three years in Chad, six years in Germany, and now eight years in South Africa.

Some Sisters brought the issue of languages and cultures to the fore in the interviews. In the respective countries, where PH, PE, PA, and PI had lived and worked in the past, language was a great challenge. PH (6) says: “I had never learned the ... local language ... I felt that I was lacking something, it was a lack that prevented me to know the people more.” The same difficulty is a challenge for PE who – for reasons linked to the kind of community she lives in – does not know the local language. “People prefer to speak their own language, even though they know English. So it is a kind of hindrance” (PE 2). Similar experiences are recounted by PA (13) and PI (7). PK also says that besides English there were many other local languages. One can learn “a bit of one language, and a bit of another one. You can get to the point of expressing yourself” (PK 4).

Although one may live close to the people with the good will to be of service, lack of knowledge of the local language remains a challenge and may affect the possibility of establishing deep relationships. Learning the local culture and language is of great importance for a missionary (Luzbetak 1988:77, 328). It allows one to communicate and to enter into relationship with local people. In fact, Communication is “the most

basic human tool at the disposal of the Church [and missionaries] in carrying out its role in the world” (:31).

According to Luzbetak (1988:139), culture is a “society’s design for living.” One can say that it encompasses the whole of the person in community and the totality of life. It is dynamic, always in a process of adjustment and formation, and it is subject to corrections and improvements. When one wants to enter into another’s culture, he or she needs to be introduced into it. In this regard, PF recounts how the youth “took time to introduce me into the new culture, the new reality” (PF 2). She also knows that entering a new culture is a process that never ends. She admits: “... even if we have been there for years, it does not mean that we understand everything” (PF 2). Likewise, PK (4) expresses the challenge “of going deep into a culture.” There are, in fact, aspects bound to the family or the clan that are not, and cannot be known by a foreigner. In fact, “there are patterns that are *beyond our reach*” (Luzbetak 1988:216, italics in original). Furthermore, where activities are concerned, at times people approach or act in a way that differs from one’s own culture. “There are steps that we, in our culture, do not even consider. They do not exist in our culture” (PK 5). All this represents a challenge.

PD (4) and PE (12) identify another challenge which is more *ad intra*, that is, within the communities of the Sisters: interculturality. Communities are increasingly being constituted by Sisters originating from various countries and continents. On the one hand, this can be greatly enriching but, on the other hand, it also becomes a challenge. PD suggests that it is important “to recognise the obstacles that ... could prevent us from allowing interculturality to flower ... the vitality that it has in itself” (PD 4). She admits that “maybe we need some more help ... and this could also become a great help for the context in which we live” (PD 4).

From another perspective, and without mentioning the term, PE (8, 12) engages with the issue of interculturality. Her community is constituted both by Sisters and by young women who are on the way to become Sisters. She accompanies and trains them. Every day she encounters the challenge of accompanying persons of another culture. She admits: “not every time I understand. Many times, I am puzzled by the things that I hear and are outside of my experience” (PE 8). She herself needs to be accompanied by someone “in order to put things in perspective and understand them.”

Interculturality within the Congregation has become a reality which the Sisters live and have to engage with, if they want it to enrich them and not remain only a



challenge. In 1997, an *Assembly on Multicultural Communities*<sup>134</sup> took place at Cairo. The final document (Cairo 97:1-3) suggested some recommendations at personal, community and Provincial level on how to enhance multiculturalism in the Sisters' communities. Although the document recommends that the Sisters should "deepen their own culture and keep up to date with books and magazines" (Cairo 97:1.6), lamentably, it does not indicate the importance of approaching and studying anthropology.

All the Acts of the Chapters after this assembly deal with interculturality in a deeper way, with the awareness that "The experience of cultural interaction, lived within the Cenacle of Apostles, opens new horizons for us" (CA 2004:9). Thus, interculturality is both a challenge (CA 2010:83) and an enrichment (:70). The Acts of the Chapter of 2016 report about the experience of encounter among Sisters of different cultures and age made at the General Chapter (CA 2016:10.3-10.6). Moreover, the Sisters make a resolution of committing themselves to live interculturality "as a gift, rather than a threat" in communities starting from the first formation (:10.7). Although this is an important assessment, one may have the impression that, like in the above mentioned *Cairo 97* document, it is merely left to the single Sister to undertake a journey of personal growth in acceptance of interculturality and *intergenerationality*.

In view of the above discussion, it can be suggested that the Congregation should consider the importance of offering reflections and insights of human sciences and especially of anthropology to all Sisters both during the first and the ongoing formation. Anthropology is, according to Whiteman (2012:81-84), underutilised in mission. This seems to be also the case of the Comboni Missionary Sisters. Whiteman rightly points out that for an incarnational way of being in mission "we need the insights of anthropology, the humility of Christ, and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit" (:91).

#### 5.5.4 Change

Changes are never easy. When attitudes, ways of praying or of doing things need to be changed, one runs the risk of evoking resistance. The Sisters experience this challenge. For instance, PJ (2) – referring to the way of life she found when she was assigned to a community in her country of origin – states that one of the biggest

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<sup>134</sup> The quotation from this document is abbreviated as Cairo 97, followed by the number of the paragraph. This assembly was organised by and for the Comboni Missionary Sisters. It was attended by 23 Sisters living and serving in Africa and the Middle East.

challenges is “... to go out and share missionary life ... to go beyond the set patterns of a convent life.” From her different experiences, PK (7) also mentions the need of “opening ourselves more,” in the sense of opening our houses both “to the welcoming of immigrants” and to lay people who wish to live with the Sisters. Regrettably, it is sometimes not easy for all the Sisters in a community to accept having to make such kinds of choices. At times the challenge lies within the individual Sister herself, who has to change and adapt to a different way of doing things (PL 4-5).

According to PJ and PF, another difficulty is the way of engaging in mission animation. While PF (2) speaks of the need of a change from the Sisters’ position; PJ (3) speaks of the need for parishes to change their position because, at times, they just want life witness from the Sisters, but do not want certain issues – such as immigration, ecology, race, justice, interculturality, etc. – to be raised or tackled.

A relevant challenge – which relates to reflexivity – is emphasised by PN (4): “the ability to engage in a process of self-evaluation.” It is when one is undergoing a self-evaluation, that one is even able to face the consequences of failure, to learn from it, and to try something different. In a word, one can change one’s way of doing things. A challenge in changing the way of doing things is also stressed by PO in whose view, this change must consist in “witnessing in humility, and not as a protagonist of mission” (PO 3). I have dealt earlier with the meaning of *protagonism* for the Sisters (5.4.4).

This witnessing is part of the “dialogue of life” (PO 3), which must happen in small things and in everyday life. The document *Dialogue and Proclamation*, by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, speaks of the “*dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations” (DP 42).

### **5.5.5 Disorientation**

Disorientation of people – especially of young people – is also a challenge that emerges from the interviews of Italian Sisters who have returned to Italy after years of working in other continents. Both PJ and PK emphasise this same point. PJ (3) finds that “accompanying people, staying beside them, and helping them to rediscover the beauty of life in itself” is a way of overcoming this challenge. Likewise, PK experiences the disorientation of people, be they “young people who need points of reference ... or

broken families” (PK 6). Here, she uses the term closeness to indicate the way to help them overcome their disorientation.

Although Italy is their country of origin, some Sisters see it as a “new reality” (PL 4), and in the words of PJ (1) “it is a very challenging context ... I am in Italy and ... I do not know Italy.” At the beginning of their missionary service in Italy, this can even create a sense of disorientation in the Sisters. This sense of disorientation is called *Reverse Culture Shock*. It means the difficulty of adjustment that a person returning to his or her home country has to face after years spent out of his or her native cultural environment (Luzbetak 1988:220). The above mentioned U-curve (5.3.2) was adapted and elaborated upon by Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963:33-47) who developed the W-curve. It comprises also the phases that characterise repatriation: excitement of the re-entry, crisis at home, recovery at home, and adjustment at home. The authors emphasise that in the W-curve of acculturation and reacculturation, “among the factors influencing the relationship between interaction and sentiment are the variables of proximity and similarity” (:41). These variables play an important role in providing an opportunity for interaction as it has also emerged from the interviews (5.2).

Reverse culture shock (for a missionary) can mean, at times, having to face more difficulties than he/she had to face when he/she went overseas (Storti 2003:170-175; Steffen & McKinney Douglas 2008:331-340), especially when the re-entry is due to sickness, age, or when it is not desired by the individual but because it is requested by the Superiors.

Coming back to one’s own country and not *recognising* it and having the feeling of not fitting in, as the two Sisters clearly state, needs time for adjustment. This means that re-entry training or *accompagnement* for reacculturation become as important as inculturation courses that are generally offered to missionaries when they arrive in a new country. The Rule of Life, in fact, foresees that each Sister should have the possibility of participating in “local courses in immediate preparation for the mission” (RoL 56.4). At the present, no “re-entry courses” are foreseen.

### **5.5.6 Challenges: Concluding comments**

In the above discussion I have exposed the most relevant challenges that the Sisters interviewed identified as facing them in their missionary life. An awareness of

the necessity for discernment in everyday life arises in the face of challenges. Powerlessness before people and their difficult situations leads the Sisters to find ways of overcoming it. Acknowledgment of the importance of knowing the local culture and language reflects the will to encounter people at a deeper level, but it is to be accepted that there is a margin of inability to understand people completely. Interculturality is presented both as a source of enrichment and as a challenge, which may still be overcome with the help of an outsider. Making changes, changing one's own way of doing things, or facing disorientation, are revealed as challenges. Some of the Sisters interviewed emphasise their personal experience of culture shock.

Analysis shows that the Sisters do not speak of changes that should possibly occur in the people to whom they minister. Rather, they recognise the challenge of changes that should happen in their own lives and communities. Yet, changes have to happen because, in the words of Luzbetak "Nothing could be more important to mission than change ..." (1988:155). However, the first changes have to happen in the missionary.

Disorientation seems to be a problem that concerns both young people and adults. It is due to the rapid changes that occur at all levels of society. Arbuckle (1990:130-138) explores youth subculture in their disorientation. Although the book is a bit dated, the reality of today's youth still shows the same experience of disorientation and alienation. Disorientation of the Sisters, who return to their country, is also a challenge and as such, it has to be taken into consideration and dealt with by the Congregation.

In the challenges emerging from the analysis, the Sisters have tried to find a way of dealing with them. What appears to be clear is that to face challenges in mission, one needs to undertake a process of discernment.

## **5.6 Encounter with Comboni's spirituality and other spiritual sources**

Encounter with Scripture and Tradition are part of the mission spirituality spiral. Through the interviews, I intended to explore how the Sisters relate to and embody Comboni's spirituality and how they relate to Scripture.

### 5.6.1 Dimensions of Comboni's spirituality

Spirituality, encounter and relationship with the Triune God (2.3.9; 2.4.2.1), is the *motor* of mission and is the dimension around which all the other dimensions of the spiral revolve. In this part of the chapter, it is connected with texts from Scripture and other spiritual authors and flows into theological reflection. The latter is the personal and communal spiritual experience and interpretation of Scripture and Tradition in a particular context. It then looks at and links to the interpretation of Scripture and Tradition of the Church (2.4.2.4).

The question of what the central dimensions of Comboni's spirituality are, has revealed that the Sisters do not simply recall, as something abstract, the dimensions as they learnt them during their years of initial formation. Rather, they highlight those dimensions because they touch and affect their lives. PD (6) states it clearly: "I dwell on one [dimension] that, maybe through my missionary experience, is emerging more than others ..."

In a way, it is difficult to separate the various dimensions because, in some cases, the Sisters combine the pierced Heart of the Good Shepherd with the cross and the contemplation of the cross.

The centrality of Christ on the cross is clear for all the Sisters; nuances are peculiar to each individual Sister. "A cross embedded with hope," is how PO (5) explains the centrality of the cross. It is a cross that does not carry a victim; rather, it is an incarnate cross. PO identifies the cross with the Good Shepherd who puts the sheep on his shoulder, that is why she links the cross and hope. PK (9) also sees the cross as a "source of life."<sup>135</sup> She learnt this from the people she serves, and who were carrying heavy crosses. Those people could identify themselves with Jesus who, by dying on the cross, "regenerated a new life. His death opened a new era for humanity" (PK 9).

PG (10) refers to the cross as the various difficulties encountered by Comboni. He did not avoid them, but "he embraced them ...". In this sense, for PG, it is important to accept and assume crosses and difficulties because there is something more at stake "for which it is worth giving one's own life and announcing this Good News" (PG 10).

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<sup>135</sup> In Chapter Three I dealt at length with how Comboni considered the cross to be a source of salvation and regeneration for humanity and for Africa (3.4.4). The cross is not weakness or defeat because – just to recall an example from Pope Francis: "it was from the cross, from his pierced side, that our Lord gave himself to us as a source of living water" (EG 86).

For PB, the cross is the place where love is expressed to its highest degree. She too indicates that Comboni carried the cross and, thus, it has “to be carried willingly and for love’s sake” (PB 5). PN (8) connects the mystery of the cross, that “is central to Comboni,” to her own experience of sickness.

A good number of Sisters recalled that the centrality of Christ implies “keeping [one’s] eyes fixed on Jesus Christ” (Heb 12:2) (Comboni, *The Rules of 1871*, in *Writings*:2721). For PF (5), “this is the foundation of everything.” It is only in this way that “everything transforms one from within. It is the source of life” (5). For PH (4) and PC (5), to keep their eyes on Jesus Christ means to comprehend what it means to give one’s life for the salvation of humanity.

The spirituality of the Pierced Heart of Jesus – or of the Good Shepherd – is very clearly part of the life of the Sisters. For PJ (5), it is a spirituality that “embraces our life, and the life of many peoples. It is a heart that continues beating ...” The heart of Jesus, today, says PM (6-7), “continues being pierced ... and continues bleeding because of many situations in the world.” The spirituality of the Heart of Jesus allowed Comboni to see Africans as his brothers and sisters. PG (10) and PJ (5) also recall this aspect.

I want to dwell on the interpretation given by PD (6). She speaks of “the contemplation of Christ, with the wounded heart, on the cross.” She speaks of a “wounded heart” not of a pierced one. It is “the contemplation of Christ crucified, who let himself be wounded, because of his closeness [she emphasises] to man [sic], to humanity” (PD 6). Like PM (6-7), she links the wounded Heart “to African people, who are wounded by the historical events that continue still today” (PD 6). For her, “Comboni moves between these two dimensions: from the people, he returns to Christ, and from Christ he returns to the people ...” In the face of Christ, Comboni could see the face of Africans. This same experience accompanies her in her missionary life. She stresses a *circularity* of mission and spirituality: “I go toward the people because I am supported by the strength that I draw from Christ ... I go to the people ... having in my eyes and in my heart this wounded heart of Christ. And from the people I return to Him. This is my identity. Without this I would be a social worker” (PD 7). This *circularity* is relevant for a transformative mission, which is not limited to simply improving the situation of a people. The identity PD is speaking about is the identity of a person who is a follower of Christ, and belongs to Christ (1 Cor 3:23). The identity of a follower of Christ does not take place in a vacuum, separated from the society and the suffering of

the people. For this reason, the identity of a follower of Christ “has a mystical element and one that is situational, one that is practical and political” (Metz 1978:42).

Some Sisters emphasise the sentiments of Jesus, of his Heart, and feel called to make them their own and to live them (PK 10; PF 5; PE 4; PD 10; PM 8; PG 16).

The figure of the Good Shepherd, who leads the sheep and gives his life for the sheep, is emphasised by the majority of the Sisters (PE 4-5; PK 9-10; PO 7; PJ 6; PG 10; PH 5; PF 5; PL 6). PL stresses the feminine aspect of this spirituality.

The strong sense of God that was present in Comboni, is also present in the Sisters. They express it with the term *contemplation*, that was also used by Comboni (PD 6, 7, 10; PO 4, 6, 12; PL 5; PF 5; PC 5; PH 4; PN 5, 9, 10; PG 10; PJ 5).

Contemplation of Jesus with the pierced Heart, or the Good Shepherd, is part of their spirituality and appears to be essential for missionary life.

Contemplation of Jesus as the Crucified or the Good Shepherd, is not an end in itself. Like Comboni, the Sisters, through contemplation, are led to the people and, in particular, to the poorest and most abandoned, *to make common cause* with them. This dimension of the spirituality of Comboni is present, in one way or the other, in all the Sisters. PC (5) and PD (6, 12) also use the term *prossimità* (closeness), that I have explored earlier.

It is also worth stressing that most of the Sisters say that it is after, or as a result of, contemplation that they recognised the importance of making common cause with the poor. As examples, PH (4) and PM (7) name first “keeping the eyes fixed on Jesus Christ” and then “making common cause.” “Making common cause” and having a “sense of providence,” for PN (9) flow from the experience of the Paschal mystery.

On the same note, other Sisters recall Comboni’s homily at Khartoum<sup>136</sup> (in *Writings*:3158-3159), which represents the way of making common cause with the people (PO 5, PB 7; PI 6; and PJ 5). This means to stay with the people also in contexts of injustice, precariousness, insecurity, abandonment, indifference, etc. The aspect of prophecy and denouncing injustice is also part of making common cause, as recalled by PC (5, 11).

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<sup>136</sup> “Come day come night, come sun come rain, I shall always be equally ready to serve your spiritual needs: the rich and the poor, the healthy and the sick, the young and the old, the masters and the servants will always have equal access to my heart. Your good will be mine and your sorrows will also be mine. I make common cause with each one of you, and the happiest day in my life will be the one on which I will be able to give my life for you.”

Both PO (5) and PJ (5) emphasise the importance of the dimension of motherhood when staying with the people. The kind of motherhood the Sisters refer to, is that of attitudes peculiar to women that were first emphasised in the Acts of the Chapter of 1998 (CA 1998:1): “compassion, intuition, welcome, solidarity, mutual care, ability of creating community,” and later in the Acts of the Chapter of 2010 (8), that is “[nurturing] life with courage and constancy ...”

Three Sisters (PB 9; PC 8; and PJ 7) recall the dimension of the *hidden stone*. It was Comboni who wanted his missionaries, both men and women, to be like “a stone hid under the earth, which will perhaps never come into the light, but is part of the building [the African Church] ...” (Rules of 1871, in *Writings*:2701). Especially for PC and PJ, it is part of their experience in the context in which they live and work.

Two Sisters (PM 6; PL 13) emphasise the importance of being “holy and capable” as Comboni wanted his missionaries to be. For PM, *holy* means to give one’s life completely, and *capable* is connected to one’s relationship with God. By virtue of this relationship, one is also *able* to do good deeds.

It is one of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (LG 40), that speaks clearly of the call of all the faithful to holiness:

... it is evident to everyone, that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity, by this holiness as such a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society. In order that the faithful may reach this perfection, they must use their strength accordingly as they have received it, as a gift from Christ. They must follow in His footsteps and conform themselves to His image seeking the will of the Father in all things. They must devote themselves with all their being to the glory of God and the service of their neighbor. In this way, the holiness of the People of God will grow into an abundant harvest of good, as is admirably shown by the life of so many saints in Church history.

In the footsteps of this document, Chapter Four in the *Aparecida Document* bears the title *The vocation of missionary disciples to holiness* (AD 129-153) and deals with the way Christians are called to strive to holiness, that is: following Jesus (:129-135); being configured to the master (:136-142); being sent to announce the Gospel and being enlivened by the Holy Spirit (:149-53). Pope Francis, in his latest Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, dwells at length on holiness, to which all Christians are called. He combines holiness and capability. He writes:



We need a spirit of holiness capable of filling both our solitude and our service, our personal life and our evangelizing efforts, so that every moment can be an expression of self-sacrificing love in the Lord's eyes. In this way, every minute of our lives can be a step along the path to growth in holiness (GE 31).

Moreover, he defines holiness as “living in constant encounter with Jesus Christ” (Bergoglio 2015:8). The fruits of this constant encounter are good deeds.

### **5.6.2 Other spiritual sources**

The mission spirituality of the Comboni Missionary Sisters is not confined to taking up the Scripture texts that featured Comboni's spirituality, his devotions or his writings. In the previous section, I indicated that the dimensions of Comboni's spirituality are taken up by the Sisters, fleshed out and lived according to their own experience in the context where they live. Besides this, the spirituality of each Sister is nurtured by other sources, such as Scripture texts, Church documents, and spiritual authors.

Analysis of the interviews has revealed that each Sister refers to these other sources, as sources that accompany them in their spiritual and missionary journey, or that were important at particular times. The variety of texts is large, but their convergence is not.

#### **5.6.2.1 Scripture**

All the Sisters exhibit a great familiarity with Scripture and, in particular, with the Gospels. The Word of God is very much part of their life. “The Word of God moves me very much...it has accompanied and enlightened me in my journey” says PG (11). To receive, pray, and contemplate the Word of God every day is, for PM (8), a sign of communion with the Church and, for PO (7), a privilege.

Various texts from the Gospel according to John seem to be relevant for a good number of Sisters. For PD (8) and PN (10) the whole of John's Gospel is very relevant. PN, for example, emphasises the contemplative dimension of this Gospel.

The texts most cited are from chapter 15. Various aspects are stressed. The image of the vine and the branches (Jn 15:5) brings PD (8) to “the experience of being with the people and deeply being with Christ.” She emphasises that Jesus stays with the crowds

and then takes time to be with the Father. Likewise, she says "... we are always three. It is not the people and me; there is always Him [sic], who ... lives with us ..." (PD 8). Together with the people, she experienced being a branch implanted in the vine. This also makes her aware of being sent by God and of the need to live this in humility. PM (9) also links this text to the call to be sent and "to become an instrument in the hand of God."

"Abide in my love" (Jn 15:9) means for PH (5) "a dynamic love that sets you in motion ... makes you involved in reality." The same text is relevant for PC (6), PJ (6) and PI (6), although they do not elaborate. Thus, it seems clear that the relationship with God necessarily sends us to others.

Both PE (6) and PA (8) refer to the first calling of the disciples in John's Gospel. While PE stresses the searching by the disciples and, therefore, her own searching for God, PA emphasises the call to discipleship. She says: "Jesus is not interested in my doing, but in the way I ... follow him" (PA 8). It is more about a call to "what you want to be." Thus, she emphasises the attitude and the quality of discipleship rather than the doing.

The encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman in the Gospel of John represents for PL (7) "the idea and the praxis of mission." PL admits that her earlier "understanding of mission was ... one-way, unidirectional. I go and bring ..." However, the story of this encounter in the Gospel and the reality she encountered in mission, helped her to change her thinking. The Samaritan woman, "whose background is, so to say, at least dark, who receives light ... also brings light to Jesus" (PL 7). One can say that Jesus and the woman are *missioning* each other. From the encounter and the dialogue between them, the Gospel is announced to the woman, but "this encounter changes the life of both ... Jesus and the woman" (PL 7).<sup>137</sup> Likewise, PL experienced this transformation of mind about mission both through this Gospel text and through the

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<sup>137</sup> PL might refer to the interpretation of the Gospel given by Mariapia Bonanate, in her book *Il Vangelo secondo una donna. Ieri e oggi. Con una lettera aperta a Benedetto XVI e ai Vescovi*. She states: "God let himself be evangelised by women. They gave him the opportunity to manifest in his whole humanity of God who became a man. Mary, his mother, started at Cana ... Then Mary Magdalene, the Samaritan woman" (Bonanate 1996:8).

Maggi (2011) argues a similar interpretation on the text of the Samaritan woman. For her, when "Jesus answers to [the Samaritan woman]: *'I am he, the one who is speaking to you'*", he says that first of all to himself ... He suddenly becomes aware that God who will come in Spirit and truth coincides with his flesh, his life. [It is] a moment of self-enlightenment prompted by a woman who urged him to look inside himself ..." (my translation).

encounter of people in mission. She learnt from these people and was transformed by them (PL 2-3).

The statement of Jesus: “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10) has a particular impact on PC (6). She connects it with the *Aparecida Document*.<sup>138</sup>

PC, encountering this Word of God and the documents of the Church, became convinced that “mission is at the service of the Kingdom, at the service of life. Mission is at the service, so that others may have life, and have it abundantly. In this sense, I feel that I have to try to live mission as a way of regenerating life – as Comboni would say ...” (PC 6). Thus, she manages to bring together the Word, the teaching of the Church and Comboni. In this way, she is able to see mission from the perspective of being a missionary disciple. Later she emphasises the importance of the encounter with Christ. She does so because “one can run the risk of taking it for granted. But it is not. Therefore, it has to be renewed in time ... in one’s own history” (PC 6). Without this continuous encounter with Christ, one cannot be a missionary. Pope Francis states it clearly in *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG 8):

Thanks solely to this encounter – or renewed encounter – with God’s love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being. Here we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization.

He also writes: “... without prayer all our activities risk being fruitless and our message empty” (EG 259). Therefore, it is important “to cultivate an interior space ... Without prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the word, of sincere conversation with the Lord, our work easily becomes meaningless” (:262). In the *Aparecida Document*, the Bishops indicate that to carry out mission, one must be *configured*, that is, be in communion with the Master (AD 136-140). A person engaged in mission must “be a devout person dedicated to prayer and constant union with God ...” (Luzbetak 1988:2).

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<sup>138</sup> In paragraph 33 of the *Aparecida Document*, the Bishops state: “As disciples of Jesus Christ, we feel challenged to discern the “signs of the times” in the light of the Holy Spirit, to place ourselves at the service of the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus who came so that all might have life and “and have it more abundantly” (Jn 10:10).” In paragraph 112, recalling the same verse of the Gospel, the Bishops remind the faithful that: “In the face of the structures of death, Jesus makes full life present ... Hence, he heals the sick, expels demons, and commits the disciples to promoting human dignity and to social relations based on justice.”

Another text from John's Gospel is relevant for PJ (6): "the truth will make you free" (Jn 8:32). She connects it to her daily call to live her life in the truth of the reality she lives and with the people she encounters every day.

The text "new wine into fresh wineskins" (Mk 2:22) is fundamental for two Sisters. PM (9), who has been accompanied by this text in her spiritual journey for many years, applies it now also to the whole congregation and to the Church. She sees the need for the Sisters to be this new wine enabling the exploration of new lifestyles and new avenues of mission. She indicates that the Congregation has to seek new and transformative ways of being in mission. For PL (8), the new wine indicates a process of becoming: "I am becoming a Comboni Missionary [Sister] ... it is a process of change ... taking away the old one and putting on a new one ... checking new ways with someone ... to discern ... whether I am on the right track, or I am going astray." She emphasises that this *becoming* is linked to discernment that has also to be done by "listening to the Word of God, to the word of the Congregation, or Pope Francis ...". Scripture and Tradition are fundamental in order for her to become what she is called to be, and to do. This attitude reveals dynamism and a great degree of openness to what is new and to the future.

The encounter with the Risen Lord by the two disciples on their way to Emmaus (Lk 24:1-32) is relevant for two Sisters (PJ 6; PE 6). Both Sisters emphasise the closeness of the Lord to the two disciples. He becomes their companion on the road and reveals himself to them. PE confirms that, at times, she has had the same experience: "In that moment, I am wondering where is God, and he is right there" (PE 6).

An interesting approach to the Beatitudes is given by PK. The Beatitudes (Mt 5) "help to read the reality with the eyes of God ... They open new perspectives, which, according to me have been very important on mission ... They make you understand, which are the attitudes" that are necessary to be on mission (PK 11). She recalls one beatitude in particular: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Mt 5:5). She and her collaborators reflected on this beatitude, especially during the time of war in Uganda. It helped them to plan and pray, and act in a non-violent way. In fact, they became convinced that only "non-violence brings about fruits ... It can heal the society and rebuild it on other models" (PK 11). This is an example showing how the link between Scripture, reality and action is implemented and bears fruit.

PB (7) considers the parable of the Good Samaritan to be a pillar in her life. Being a nurse, she feels particularly close to this figure, because it is about "... being a caring

servant to save life, to save a person.” Moreover, the Samaritan was able to reschedule his journey because the need of the person, who had been attacked and beaten, was of greater importance. The example of the Samaritan “helps me to become aware and to live the present moment ...” – she states (PB 7). Working at the dispensary, she has to find time for all, to stop and to listen to the patients, to reschedule what she had programmed (PB 8). This text helps her to be flexible in serving.

The texts of the Gospels that involve the senses are very important to PG. She emphasises that Jesus’ senses are “very awake” (PG 11). She recalls the episode of the woman who was suffering from haemorrhages (Mk 5:35-34). “Jesus, in the midst of the crowd, is able to feel who has touched him in a different way ... He can sense the cry of this woman. He can understand it.” PG also refers to the episode of the widow, who puts two small copper coins into the treasury (Mk 5:41-44). “Jesus is there and sees. He looks beyond appearances ... He is able to see something important where there is nothing special” (PG 12). For PG, Jesus possesses a particular sensibility in being able to understand the other and his or her needs, because his senses are “awake.” This attitude is extremely important in PG’s missionary life. It means being particularly attentive, which is, in fact, of paramount importance for encountering people, the context, the Word, and for being in discernment.

“Learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart” (Mt 11:29). These words have been a constant presence in the spiritual journey of PK (14). She links them to “the spirituality of the cross; therefore, dying to oneself ... so that mission may grow.” It is about a dying to everything that can prevent the encounter with the other at the same level, and learning from him or her.

PO mentions the figure of Ruth and compares the attitude of this woman to that of Comboni. Both *make common cause*: Ruth with Naomi, her people and her God, and Comboni with the peoples of Africa. Ruth “is the woman that I really identify with our missionary journey” (PO 7). It is an important statement that PO makes, because the figure of Ruth has also been taken up by the Acts of the Chapters of 2016 (CA 2016:6) and does reflect the missionary journey of the Sisters. The said Acts remind the Sisters that they are called “to make common cause with the people who welcome us” (:6.6); that they have to listen “to the cry of the world and of the Congregation, in order to give courageous responses ...” (:6.7). Ruth is also an example to them of being transformed by the people, to “embrace their cultural and religious values with acceptance and respect” (:6.7). Ruth, as it were, also serves as a challenge to the Sisters “to live the

multicultural and inter-generational dimensions of the charism as a source of life” (:6.8). All these dimensions are part of Comboni’s charism.

### **5.6.2.2 Documents of the Church**

The Sisters also refer to documents of the Church, or to authors who are relevant for their spirituality. Thirteen Sisters say that the figure and the writings of Pope Francis are relevant for them. Some of them (PG 1; PM 9; PF 6; PE 7; PD 12) refer more specifically to the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. That exhortation gives great importance to encounter with Christ (EG 264-267) and with others (EG 268-274). It also stresses the need of a Church that goes forth to the peripheries (EG 20-24). These themes are relevant for the Sisters.

Two Sisters also refer to the Encyclical Letter *Laudato si’*, on the care of the earth, which is our common home. Whilst PJ (8) emphasised the importance of moving towards a new lifestyle, as described in the encyclical letter (LS 203-208), PA (9) stresses that beyond cultural differences “we have a common ground, we have a common life ... we share a common earth and common home,” and by respecting the common values, the earth and one another “we are fulfilling our vocation as creatures.” The importance of an ecological mission spirituality is clearly expressed.

### **5.6.2.3 The importance of the past**

Other spiritual sources are indicated by individual Sisters. I mention only two because I consider them relevant for a deepening of the Combonian mission spirituality. The stories of the Sisters and fathers, who suffered under the Mahdist revolution, shape the spirituality of PL (7) because they help her to grasp the dimension of martyrdom that was so important for Comboni.

The circular letters of the first General Superiors are important for PJ (7). In these letters, she discovered that the prophecy and the tenacity of those women have in the past borne fruit in the Congregation. She also wonders where this prophecy can be applied today. Both PL and PJ go back to the beginning of the Congregation. This is important. It serves to acknowledge the past, to learn from it and to look at the future with new perspective. Whilst the present research has explored the circular letters of the

first General Superiors through the lens of the mission spirituality spiral, it has not given detailed consideration to the mission spirituality lived by the Sisters who suffered under the Mahdist revolution. This may be a future field of research.

#### 5.6.2.4 Spiritual authors

Apart from Biblical texts, the writings of Comboni and the Church documents, spiritual authors as sources for the nourishment of their spirituality are quoted by only a few Sisters. It is interesting to highlight that PA (9-10) speaks of the influence that the Protestant theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, has had on her. She learnt from him that “you are a Christian because of Jesus ... So your life has something ... to say to others that you are bound to Jesus ... who has the power to transform your life” (PA 9). In this strong relationship with Jesus, “there will be a price to pay.” PA (9) realises that this price “might mean to sacrifice something ... [and this is for her] a deeper call to find ... deeper joy.” PA stays with this warning for herself but does not develop it further. One could say that this *price to be paid* might even be, as seen by Comboni, the readiness for martyrdom.

As sources, PN points to various texts from the Bible and from Church documents. She also speaks of Teilhard De Chardin and his *The Mass on the World*.<sup>139</sup> She mentions Archbishop Óscar Romero,<sup>140</sup> the monks of Tibhirine,<sup>141</sup> the homilies of Brother Roger Schütz (the founder of the Taizé community) and the Jesuit Silvano Fausti (PN 11). PN does not specifically indicate how these sources have influenced her spiritual life. However, she emphasises that they helped her develop a great interest in “the study of the Word, as an autodidact ...” (PN 11).

PM (9) says that she finds great inspiration in the Eucharistic prayer V/b,<sup>142</sup> because it helps her “to be more concrete” and helpful towards the needy.

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<sup>139</sup> In Teilhard De Chardin’s book *Hymn of the Universe*, published in 1961, Chapter One was entitled The Mass on the World.

<sup>140</sup> Romero was Archbishop of San Salvador. He was assassinated in 1980, while celebrating mass.

<sup>141</sup> They were seven monks belonging to the Order of Cistercians (known as Trappist) who lived in at Tibhirine, Algeria. During the civil war, in 1996, they were kidnapped and, later, were found dead.

<sup>142</sup> The Eucharistic prayer is the centre and summit of the liturgy of the Eucharist. During this part of the Mass bread and wine are consecrated through the Holy Spirit and become Christ’s Body and Blood. There are various Eucharistic prayers and they are numbered to be used for various feasts and seasons.

### **5.6.3 Encounter with Comboni's spirituality and other spiritual sources: Concluding comments**

From the analysis of the interviews it emerges that the Sisters do not simply recall, in the abstract, the texts that refer to the dimensions of Comboni's spirituality. They point to those texts, which deeply touch and affect their lives. One can say that they make them their own; they shape their lives. Analysis of both these texts and of the other sources that enrich the spirituality of each Sister, demonstrates that they help the Sisters in being in mission. In these sources, the Sisters discover attitudes that have to be developed and lived. These can be summarised as follows: closeness, discernment, openness to newness, non-violence, flexibility, attentiveness, humility, being more than doing, and making *common cause* with people.

## **5.7 Mission and spirituality in relationship**

I conducted the interviews by firstly exploring the experience of encounter of the Sisters with others and with the context. I, then, invited the Sisters to consider the transformations that these encounters brought about in their lives. The exploration of their spiritual sources followed. The successive step was to ask them to think about the relationship between mission and spirituality, that is, how they are shaping one another.

### **5.7.1 Mutual shaping**

The questions about how mission shapes spirituality and, in turn, about how spirituality shapes mission, proved to be a challenge for the Sisters. Some dodged the questions by speaking in general and somewhat evasively (PC 8; PK 13; PI 7-8). Others said that the question was difficult to answer (PN 12; PA 11). "I would not even know how to put it" declares PE (9). PO (9) states: "... I thought of it, yes. Actually, it is difficult ...". For PL (9) "this is a million-dollar question ...". Other Sisters like PH (7) confirm that one shapes the other and vice-versa but she had difficulty in elaborating her insights.

Despite the above difficulty, an important point of view is offered by PD (10) when considering how mission shapes spirituality. "The daily encounter with people



makes the desire for an encounter with Him [sic] grow in me...” It is then in the presence of the Eucharist and the cross in the chapel, that all the encounters of the day are brought together in contemplation. “Without those daily encounters [with the people], that encounter [with God] would be empty” (PD 10). PO also experiences that mission causes a growth within her of “the need for silence and contemplation ... in order to allow God to speak” (PO 9-10). For PA (11), “the God that I experience now is made up of people. Somehow, it is a *populated* God ...” People encountered become part of the encounter with God.

On the other hand, like other Sisters PF confirms that the encounter with Christ necessarily “urges one to go to others, to mission” (PF 5). PA (12) says “God takes you back to the people.” Spirituality also carries and supports one in the daily situation encountered in mission (PH 7). “There is a spiritual experience, that generates and nurtures mission ... and mission is something that continuously sends me back to my relationship with God” states PN (13). Thus, she continues, “mission and spirituality feed off each other.”

It seems clear to some Sisters that mission and spirituality shape each other, and one sends back to the other. The section on encounter with Comboni’s spirituality and other sources (5.6) has shown how these sources do shape the Sisters’ ways of being in mission. However, it seems difficult for them to explain how this happens. This indicates that mutual shaping of mission and spirituality needs to be reflected on and explored by the Sisters.

## **5.7.2 Definitions**

Definitions of both mission and spirituality were formulated directly or indirectly by some of the Sisters. In some cases, I asked what they meant by mission or by spirituality. Below I explore the definitions given by the Sisters.

### **5.7.2.1 Defining mission**

In mentioning the challenges that are present in the context where she lives, PD names one, which – in my view – can be considered a definition of mission. Mission is “... to help people savour God ... That through us, they [people] may encounter this

God of life” (PD 4). Likewise, PH (5) speaks of the importance of opening ways for people in order for them “to have an experience of God the Father, and of the Good Shepherd.” Mission for PM (8) is that people “may experience the encounter with Him [sic] ... in their own way, in the context, in which they are.” Mission is a lifestyle, “it is like a treasure that one has to take to others” (PM 10). These statements define mission in a way similar to which I did in Chapter Two (2.2.3).

PE (7) identifies the challenge of listening to God when discerning the vocation of a young woman and, at the same time, defines mission as *missio Dei*, in which one wants to participate. Later in the interview, PE (9) defines “mission as being with ... the people ... accompanying them on their journey.” In section 5.2, it emerged that being with the people is very important because that encounter with them is actually what lasts. Thus, “mission as encounter ... staying with” (PD 9) is of paramount importance. It is not so much about doing, but about encountering and staying with the people. For PC, mission finds its meaning in relationship with others, and originates from the relationship within the Trinity. Mission thus becomes “welcoming others, the diversities ... Mission is [therefore] always inclusive. It creates community” (PC 13).

Sisters working in Latin America or in Europe do not consider mission from a geographical point of view. Mission does not take place only in the Southern hemisphere (PC 13; PL 1, 3). “Mission is not a geographic space” asserts PM (11) with conviction.

It is worth mentioning this, because mission has been considered for a long time to be something unidirectional, going from the Northern to the Southern hemisphere, and very much focused on the development of the countries there. It is worthwhile remembering that, in 1963, the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, gathered in Mexico-City under the theme of *mission in six continents*, contributed to the enlargement of the perspective of mission that now encompasses every continent and not only those of the South. This shift in thinking occurred also within the Comboni Missionary Sisters in recent times, although, lamentably, the old idea is still present in some instances. It is, therefore, important to mention that this issue has been considered in some recent Acts of the Chapter: the priority of the presence of the Sisters in Africa is confirmed and, at the same time, their presence in other continents reflects the dynamism of the charism (CA 2004:2-3; CA 2010:61-64; CA 2016:11.5). In the summary of the workshops on *Ministeriality* it is

stated that “the geographical aspect of mission that sharply divided ‘mission countries’ and ‘Christian countries’ is no longer valid” (Cristinelli 2013:351).

### **5.7.2.2 Defining spirituality**

A definition of spirituality is provided by some Sisters. It is compared to “that humus that is under the grass and keeps it green ... It is the Spirit of God that lives in you, and you have to let it emerge” says PC (9). In PH’s words, “it is what gives life” (PH 7). For PG (14), spirituality is “a lifestyle ... It is a way of perceiving God in our history.” Thus, they consider spirituality to be an essential part of life.

Three Sisters define spirituality as a *motor*. For PJ (10) “it is the motor that nourishes ...,” and for PK (15) “it is the great transforming motor.” PD (12) says that mission has more clearly to reflect spirituality, which “is essential, which is the motor.” I find myself in agreement with them, as I also consider spirituality to be the *motor* of mission as argued in Chapter One (1.1).

Spirituality is defined by PD (10) as also “a mysterious and invisible bond between God, me and the others.” For her it is “the Spirit that moves between us, and between us and God ... It is an encounter” (PD 11). Likewise, PL (10) defines spirituality as God’s Spirit in her, in the reality and in the people she is called to encounter. In other words, spirituality is encounter with the Triune God and that leads to the encounter with others.

PN considers spirituality to be a continuous “search for God, together with others” (PN 12). It is not only a personal search. It must happen with others. This indicates an interpretation of spirituality that is dynamic and communal.

### **5.7.3 Inseparability of mission and spirituality**

Mission and spirituality relate to each other; they shape each other. Analysis of the interviews makes this clear. All Sisters agree: mission and spirituality are inseparable. PA (12) says that “there is no separation” between the two. For PG (14) they are united; PE (9) speaks of an intertwining; and PN (12) says “they are amalgamated in my life.” “I cannot live mission without spirituality. And spirituality automatically sends me back to mission” asserts PF (7).

This unity between mission and spirituality is clear. Therefore, “it is difficult to separate them” says PB (8), supported by PI (8) and PM (12). For PD (7) mission and spirituality are united and, at the same time, are not a melange. For her, they are like “two lungs that are always in relationship.” In this sense, they “are inseparable.”

The image of grass, representing mission, and of water, representing spirituality, is employed by PJ (9). If there is no water to nourish the grass, the latter withers. PH (7) likewise emphasises that “should we separate them, there would be a fragmentation ... [that is, it would be] something without life.” Should this separation occur, one would fall into either spiritualism or activism. For PO (10), “spirituality and mission kiss each other ...” She compares them to two lovers who “cannot be separated from one another, otherwise they become sterile.” This also means that mission, in order to be transformative and bear fruit, necessarily needs spirituality.

Mission without spirituality would lead to functioning like a social worker (PD 7), which in itself is not negative, but is also not enough for Christian mission. Conversely, spirituality without mission would be an end in itself and, therefore, could turn into other-worldly piety.

The image of the missionary disciple used in the *Aparecida Document*<sup>143</sup> is relevant to bringing mission and spirituality together and to showing that, in PC’s words, they “must be one” (PC 6).

I now dwell on the conclusion that was voiced by GS. She believes that mission and spirituality are one: “we have to separate them in speaking, but they are one...” She continues: “Spirituality is ... being at home with God, and God is ... operating through you ... already doing mission ... and doing mission is a tangible expression of spirituality.” The connection between mission and spirituality is so co-extensive that, as she puts it, “they are one reality” (PL 9). PL comes to the conclusion that, because mission and spirituality are one reality, they cannot be separated “so ... it’s mission spirituality” (PL 9). I find myself in full agreement with her. We may speak of mission

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<sup>143</sup> The *Aparecida Document* revolves around the image of the missionary disciple, in which being disciple of Jesus and being missionary, come together. In the final document, the Bishops quote the words spoken by Pope Benedict XVI in his address at the beginning of the conference: “The disciple, founded in this way upon the rock of God’s word, feels driven to bring the Good News of salvation to his brothers and sisters. Discipleship and mission are like the two sides of a single coin: when the disciple is in love with Christ, he cannot stop proclaiming to the world that only in him do we find salvation (cf. Acts 4:12). In effect, the disciple knows that without Christ there is no light, no hope, no love, no future” (AD 146).

It is worth remembering that Pope Francis was the Cardinal of Buenos Aires, Argentina and one of the Bishops who wrote the *Aparecida Document*. It is, therefore, not surprising that he used the same image of missionary disciples in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*.

and spirituality separately, but in the end one is part of the other; they have the same core – as I argued in Chapter Two (2.2.3 and 2.3.9) – and, therefore, it is appropriate to speak of mission spirituality. As spirituality can only be a mission spirituality, then mission necessarily has spirituality.

#### **5.7.4 Mission and spirituality in relationship: Concluding comments**

Although the Sisters have had difficulty in verbalising how mission and spirituality shape one another, when looking at the transformation brought about through encounter with people, context, Scripture and other sources, as expressed by them, it is clear that this mutual shaping does take place in their lives. Mission and spirituality are considered inseparable and, therefore, one can and should speak of mission spirituality. I suggest that, in becoming aware that both spirituality and mission have the same core – encounter with the Triune God – this can help to identify better how the two relate to and shape one another.

### **5.8 Ministeriality**

In Chapter One (1.10.7), I introduced the term *ministeriality*, and how the Comboni Missionary Sisters define it in the Acts of the Chapter of 2010. It means “the style of our presence and service, a way of being disciples of the Risen Lord, sharing the great passion of our Founder” (CA 2010:18). In Chapter Four (4.4.5), I briefly explored the summary of the workshops held in the Congregation on *ministeriality*. During the interviews, I put questions about *ministeriality* to verify the Sisters’ understanding of this term, and whether and how it can be helpful in shaping the future of the Congregation.

#### **5.8.1 Defining *ministeriality***

It is notoriously difficult to formulate definitions. Indeed, to my question “How would you define *ministeriality*?” a good number of the Sisters found it difficult to give a concise definition. Although, on the one hand, PD states that “the term is well

understood, at a rational level” (PD 15), on the other hand, a degree of confusion arises in expressing clearly the meaning of the term. A few examples may suffice. PE (10) states: “We have been reflecting a lot on *ministeriality*. Ministry! Yes, we call it ministry ...” But, immediately after this statement, she says that it is important to return “the well of spirituality, in order that our ministry be really ministry.” PF is also a bit confused in trying to define the term. On the one hand, she insists that it has to have a spirituality but, immediately afterward, she says that “*ministeriality* means the various ministries...services” (PF 11), for instance, youth ministry and health ministry. To my question: “Is it what we do?” she answers: “if ministry does not have a spirituality ... then we continue to separate ...”

With a sense of bafflement, I realised that no Sister could recall the whole formulation given in the Acts of the Chapter of 2010 (18).

Three Sisters (PL 12; PN 15-16; PC 12) define *ministeriality* as **service** to God, to the Kingdom and to the Church. However, for them, it is not confined to service. It includes also the spiritual dimension and discipleship (PL 12), a biblical foundation (PC 12), and “a lifestyle that contains many things” (PN 15). Along this line of defining *ministeriality* as service, PI states that “this is our *ministeriality*: our work, the work that the Lord sanctifies, because God gave it to us” (PI 10).

One Sister defines *ministeriality* as “a way of being, of expressing oneself, of staying with the people” (PG 16). For her, it also has to do with “our being women of the Gospel.”

It is worth mentioning that two Sisters criticised the term *ministeriality* as such. When asked the meaning of the term, PM (16) emphasises that she means “service, not ministry.” At the same time, she calls into question the coining of new terms. For her that creates confusion among the Sisters and among people: “At times, one does not understand what we mean by that term” (PM 17). The term *ministeriality* is considered, by PJ (12), to be “a bit sterile, not circular, and not captivating.” At first, she states that she cannot find another term to define a pastoral work that focuses more on the “being there” and “making common cause.” Then, surprisingly, she suggests the use of the phrase “*circularity* of human resources,” because, she says, it would include “making common cause” (PJ 13). Moreover, in her view, it would prevent “confining ourselves to opening or closing communities.” Apparently, this phrase would include a discernment on how the Sisters are to be present in a given context. It is not clear how she comes to these conclusions. However, I intend to maintain the term *ministeriality*

because it is more relevant than KS's suggestion. I will expand on my view of *ministeriality* later (5.8.3).

### **5.8.2 *Ministeriality*: Only ministry and *redesigning* of presences?**

The term *ministeriality*, for the Sisters, does not mean only service, ministry or *redesigning* of presences (4.5.3) in the context in which they live and work, but it is something more.

PA is of the opinion that too much importance is given to doing which still seems to define who one is. *Ministeriality* certainly includes the ministries that the Sisters engage in and the *redesigning* of presences, but is also about discipleship, following Jesus, “which should be the heart [of *ministeriality*]” (PA 17). PL (12) also mentions discipleship as part of *ministeriality*: “you are a disciple and apostle together ... spirituality and mission ... converge.”

PE (11) is convinced that *ministeriality* also consists of spirituality. PF (11), who was confused in trying to define the term, insists that *ministeriality* includes spirituality “with one's own prayer and vocational experience.” She also adds a community dimension (PF 12).

It is clear, for PO (13), that “*ministeriality* without spirituality is dry, without sap.” She thinks that the terms spirituality and *ministeriality* “have to be coined together.” It appears *ministeriality* is still seen as representing only ministry and therefore needing the input of spirituality.

I mention only one other comment that I consider very important in regard to *ministeriality*. According to PD (14) the term *ministeriality* is very positive because, in addition to the apostolic element, it also includes vocation. Moreover, she asserts that the term *ministeriality* “is a wonderful way to unite mission and spirituality” (PD 15); in it, the two come to be integrated. A similar understanding of the term is offered by PG (16): “It is not only activity. It is not only work. It is a way of being ... and of staying with people ... *Ministeriality* teaches us, helps us to integrate all the dimensions of our being missionaries ...” These statements are of paramount importance, because they express that through that term, integration between mission and spirituality occurs. Yet, if it seems, on the one hand, that the term is understood in this way, on the other “it does

not have a strong impact on a change of attitudes and on ways of being” (PD 15). Therefore, the concrete integration and implementation remain a challenge. PD wishes that the Sisters may be able “to find tangible ways of application of the term to everyday life” (PD 15).

From the responses of the Sisters, it is clear that as a congregation we need to engage in a process through which we clarify the meaning of *ministeriality*.

### **5.8.3 *Ministeriality*: The need of reflection and in-depth study**

From the above discussion, a difficulty on the part of the Sisters in defining and expressing what *ministeriality* really is, or intends to be can be perceived. A good number of Sisters openly state that reflection on the term and its implications for everyday life needs to continue (e.g. PD 15).

Various opinions emerged as to why the reflection on *ministeriality* must continue. One of the reasons is expressed by PE (11): “maybe we have not had enough time to interiorise it ...” Another Sister says that the term “was not developed ... I think we still have to reflect upon it, ... to reflect on what we mean by that term” PH (12). The profound meaning of the term with its implications seems, therefore, not to be completely owned by the Sisters. For this reason, PG (16) declares that “we need to continue its study, in order to make it our own.”

The continued reflection on *ministeriality* has to be done “in the light of the charism” (PO 13), “with the Word of God ... and with the social teaching of the Church” (PL 13). This reflection, therefore, must be done through encounter with Scripture and Tradition. PL (13) also states that the reflection on *ministeriality* “will be helpful. Thus, it will become less ... doing ... and more reflecting, discerning ...” Thus, discernment also has a role to play, and can offer a better chance of focusing more on *being* than on *doing*. PO (13) also emphasises that continuous and necessary reflection on *ministeriality* “will have to determine the way of expressing our style [of living mission spirituality] ... This reflection has to be supported by spirituality.” Being and spirituality are thus very much part of *ministeriality*.

*Ministeriality* appears to be a versatile concept, which is not confined to ministry. PF (11) suggests that “we need to deepen it, and find new things in this term *ministeriality*.” I consider this statement very relevant, because it implies that the



concept is dynamic. It can offer great insights and practical possibilities in discerning ways of being in mission.

At this point, it is worth recalling my personal experience at the workshop on *ministeriality* that was held in 2010 in the Province MOSA<sup>144</sup> to which I belong. During the workshop, I realised that the Province was mainly focusing on the ministries in which the Sisters are engaged, or should be involved in. Spirituality and *being* were – in my opinion – not considered, or perhaps simply taken for granted. I still remember my feeling of unease. I was wondering whether my desire to attach explicitly a greater importance to spirituality and *being*, was sidelining me from the Congregation. At the same time, however, I was convinced that *ministeriality* did not merely comprise ministries, but that spirituality was part of it. Over time, personal reflection, study of missiology and my personal pastoral experience have confirmed that.

#### **5.8.4 *Ministeriality*: Concluding comments**

Analysis of the interviews has shown that *ministeriality* is much more than merely ministry. On the contrary it includes: service; *being*; discipleship; vocation; a community dimension; lifestyle; encounter with Scripture and Tradition, prayer and spirituality; and more. Hence, the emergence of the need and the desire for a continued reflection upon *ministeriality* within the Congregation.

That said, it appears clear to me that – as PD (15) says – the term *ministeriality* unites mission and spirituality. It better expresses their integration. We have seen earlier how PL (9) comes to the conclusion that, because mission and spirituality cannot be separated, we should speak of *mission spirituality*. This integration of mission and spirituality now necessarily becomes applicable to the term *ministeriality* as well.

### **5.9 The need for reflection on mission and spirituality**

The need for reflection on *ministeriality* includes the need for reflection on mission and spirituality. Analysis of the interviews brings this to light. One of the questions in the interviews related to the possible relevance of this research for both the individual Sister and the Congregation. In this regard, one might object that such a

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<sup>144</sup> The Province MOSA comprises the countries Mozambique and South Africa.

question may be manipulative in order to get approval from the Sisters. The intention of this question from my side was to understand to what extent my way of proceeding in regard to mission and spirituality was relevant for them. From the outset, my fear was that their answers to my question could also have indicated that what I was doing might have seemed to be completely irrelevant to the Sisters. Nevertheless, I risked going ahead, expecting criticism from them. The Comboni Missionary Sisters are notoriously well known for their commitment to *doing* in mission. My research was, instead, heading in the direction of a mission spirituality that would shape *being* in mission.

It needs to be pointed out that I held the interviews before writing Chapters Three and Four that study respectively the mission spirituality of Comboni and of the Comboni Missionary Sisters, through the lens of the mission spirituality spiral. As a member of the Congregation, I well know our mission spirituality; I live it. However, it was only by conducting this research that I realised more deeply how rich and relevant the mission spirituality of Comboni and that of the Sisters are and can be for the future of the Congregation.

That said, I return to the question I put to the Sisters. To my surprise, all spoke positively about the relevance of the research for the Congregation. Various expectations were voiced.

There is a realisation among them that there is a certain lack of reflection on mission and spirituality. Some Sisters clearly state: “we are always in a hurry. We do not have time. We do not stop to understand what we live ...” (PD 11). In mission, “you do not have time to stop, to reflect” says PC (9-10). In addition, PG (15), reflecting on how spirituality can transform her way of being in mission, states “I think we are very much lacking this. And it is important to really stop ...” She also admits that at times in her life “mission was *doing*.”

The interview exercise itself already helped the Sisters to stop, reflect and introspect. This is very positive for PL: “[The interview was a calling] to me, to share ... It is an opportunity, a blessing for me too” (PL 11). The interview awakened in PG (17) “the desire to love this spirituality that God gave us and make it my own.” For PI (11), who is in her 80s, it was a chance to revisit her own mission and life experience. The interview was for (PH 12) an opportunity “to review what is inside me.”

The Sisters hope that this research will address some emerging needs. For instance, PE (10) hopes that it may help to promote a train of thoughts and provide something solid. PD (11) hopes that it may provide “a systematic reflection of the

missionary experience we are living” because, she continues, “at times, we are scattered.” PA (13) puts emphasis on the fact that “it can call us back to ... our vocation, which is meant to be a presence more than ... an agency.” The hope to be brought back to the core of vocation is stressed by PF (8). PN wishes that it may help “to focus more and more on the ... motivations of our being missionaries” and, therefore, “on the reason why we do something;” in a word: that it may assist us in going back to spirituality, “because we tend to dwell on discussions at a sociological level ... and we lose what is constitutive for us ... that is the spirituality of the Heart of Jesus” (PN 14). PG (15) hopes that the research may help us to “go back to our spirituality, and that this spirituality may transform us ...” PH (8) wishes to gain “ways with which our spirituality can find concretisation.” The expectation of PO is that the research may “show a way ... The way of carrying out mission today needs to be transformed by a spirituality, more than a methodology” (PO 11).

Other expectations are that this research may be of help to the Congregation to reflect on being in mission in new ways, deepening the charism and keeping it alive (PL 11; PN 17). The return to charism and spirituality is also considered a way of being in mission. I will deal with it later in this chapter (5.10.9).

In addition, PK (18) expects that it may “give light to our *ministeriality*, to our ways of being with the people, and to our ways of being a presence.” PJ (10) expresses herself in a similar way; she hopes that: “this research may discern transforming strategies that can give shape to our new *ministeriality*.” She also hopes to receive “guidelines for self-evaluation and evaluation with the help of the people” (PJ 11).

Analysis of interviews shows that reflection on mission and spirituality seems, to some extent, to be lacking. Because of the awareness of this shortcoming, the desire to reflect seems to be growing. The Sisters expect that this research will be of assistance to the Congregation in its reflection on mission, spirituality and the relationship between the two. The desire for guidelines to live a transformative mission rooted in spirituality seems, it must be acknowledged, to be the common denominator of the expectations of the Sisters. They seem to regard such guidelines relating rather to attitudes than to concrete areas in which to commit themselves.

## 5.10 New ways of being in mission

As explained in Chapter Two (2.4.2.5), I choose to speak of ways of being in mission rather than of strategies for mission. However, in formulating questions, I decided to mention to the Sisters both *strategies for mission* and *ways of being in mission*. My intention was to allow more space for them to express themselves. I asked them to speak from experience about such strategies or such ways.

In response the Sisters talked about ways or attitudes to be adopted and lived in mission. Only two Sisters name areas where mission should take place. PC names “new strategies of presence” by referring to “human trafficking, ecology, justice and peace ... immigration” (PC 10-11). To these she adds the denouncing of situations of injustice (PC 5, 11). PL mixes these areas with attitudes: “I very much believe that justice and peace and integrity of creation and compassion ... and dialogue ... are facets of the mission” (PL 13). PF (2) identifies these areas as challenges that the Sisters should face.

### 5.10.1 Collaboration (working with) and Attitude

In one way or another, all the Sisters, emphasise collaboration as one of the ways to live transformative mission in the present time.

PA names collaboration to be the first way. However, she also realises that collaboration is difficult, especially with Sisters in the same community: “We have tried to create teams of Sisters, first of all, and then together with lay people: local and from abroad ... yet it’s so difficult ...” (PA 13). In wondering why it is so difficult, she identifies among Sisters power, control, and personality issues as possible causes (PA 13). She also sees how such a lack of collaboration has a negative impact on projects: “things come to an end because one Sister is not there. So the programme is shut down ... [Therefore,] the message we are passing to people, I think, is harmful” (PA 14).

Accordingly, to work with others and not like a *lone ranger*, is important. “Today we will work with people!” exclaims PB (10) with full conviction. There is a great awareness of the importance of networking: “I do not know everything ... I cannot go alone ... this is mission with others,” says PM (13).

PJ (12) believes that collaboration with lay people, especially with the youth is necessary today. PF (8-10) emphasises the importance of collaboration with both lay

people and the Comboni family. She sees it as Comboni's legacy: "at the beginning of the Congregation, that was the idea. Comboni left [for Africa] with lay people, before leaving with Sisters and priests. He believed in it ... We have not given much importance to this. We have always done ... It was always us ..." (PF 9). She also makes an important point in stating that "if lay people love the Combonian spirituality, they too have received Comboni's charism" (PF 10). Likewise, PO recalls Comboni's legacy and the importance of sharing the charism with lay people. She speaks of an "enlarged family ... to be the future of mission ..." (PO 12). She sees the need of working with "lay people of any religion and any origin ... and to pass onto them ... the spirit ... the motivations ..." For her it is imperative "to think together, to come to a common viewpoint" (PO 12).

For PG (16), the question is to find the way to "really work with others, participate together ... to give space to others both as community and in pastoral activities."

Collaboration, that is "to work together ... to be inclusive" is the "main strategy" for PL (11). "Working with" is also emphasised by PK (5, 17).

The importance of working together with the local Church is stressed by some Sisters. Although it is not easy because of a widespread clericalism in the country where PC works, she still emphasises "the importance of walking together with the local Church and local people" (PC 11).

PA, for example, is convinced that "we should ... be able to sit with the local Church and embrace that local plan of the local Church, and put our forces there, our energies, our Sisters ..." (PA 16). From her experience in Africa, she recalls the difficulty of working with the local Church, especially with diocesan priests. This difficulty can in some cases lead us to "creating our own programmes and to separate ourselves from the local Church, because there have been big issues ..." However, she also comes to the only coherent conclusion: "If we are not ... rooted in the local Church, where are we going to be rooted? I don't think Comboni would be very happy" (PA 16).

*To work with* necessarily excludes any form of *protagonism*. "Once we were protagonists ... Today not. We are not protagonists. We just drive, we give strength ..." says PB (10). For PF also, it is important "not to go as protagonists [on mission]" (PF 8). Therefore, it is important "to live my presence with much humility" (PD 8).

Humility is also emphasised by PO, who, mentioning Bosch (1991:489), states “I think it is the heart ... of the ministry, of evangelisation: humility” (PO 8). For her it is the most important attitude to live in mission.

When *protagonism* is set aside, simplicity proves to be essential for *working with*. For PA (14), it is a real call that allows others “to bring their contribution.” Simplicity, for her, also means “not to provide everything for the others ... [It means to pass] from a sophisticated mission to ... something simpler” (PA 14). In a similar vein, PC, referring to Pope Francis who gives simple prophetic signs, emphasises the importance of “returning to the simplicity of the Gospel ... of the encounter with Christ” (PC 14).

Along with simplicity and humility, a listening attitude is essential. PJ says clearly: “Let us listen!” (PJ 11). PL (11) also says “a strategy today is listening, listening, listening, and listening. Before beginning to work ... listening!” The fact that she emphasises the verb “listening” four times, makes it clear that listening is, for her, the main attitude for living mission. Listening also means “to approach the reality, the people slowly and ... to wait ... to be patient ... to observe” (PL 12).

Other Sisters also attach importance to an attitude of listening. PG (16), for instance, speaks of “listening to people with the heart.” Although PH does not mention it as a way of being in mission, she is convinced that should she return to Africa, she will have to have a different attitude, that is, she needs a “more [global] view of what happens, [and she needs] to listen more ...” (PH 6). *Listening* is an essential discipline that one has to develop if mission is to be fruitful. This also applies to attitudes of profound respect, confidence, and humility (Downey 2006:127-128).

### **5.10.2 Inter-congregational service**

Collaboration with others and the local Church is important for the Sisters. Related to this is the validity of collaboration with other religious congregations. Inter-congregational service is the first new way to be in mission indicated by PH (9). She recalls the experience the Congregation has of the commitment of one member working in a community with Sisters belonging to other congregations, in response to the needs of people in the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti. For PH, it is clear: it is about “a different mission: an inter-congregational one with various ministries” (PH 10). PF also has clear ideas: “I see the future of religious life to be inter-congregational” (PF 9). She

owes this perspective to the positive experience she had when she worked with an inter-congregational team. There she experienced all “the spiritual and charismatic richness” (PF 9) of working together. For PJ (12) too, inter-congregational service is an important way of being in mission. However, the choice of working with other congregations cannot be dictated by the fact that the number of its Sisters is diminishing. PJ (12) is convinced that the choice must rather come from “a discernment and it is a choice of presence ...”

### 5.10.3 Encounter: *Being more than doing*

Earlier in this chapter (5.2), we have seen how the Sisters live encounter with others. For some, encounter is the core around which mission has to revolve. PD is convinced about that: “I would focus on ... encounter. [We need] to rediscover ... a style of presence that enhances encounter with others. We are still too worried about doing something for others. We have to put encounter in the first place” (PD 12). This implies an equality in relationships (*auf Augenhöhe*) and relations of friendship. In a word: “[We need] to discover a more relational mission” (PD 12). In this sense, PD also emphasises that African Sisters have the ability “of putting themselves at the same level as the other” (PD 13). “They favour encounter,” continues PD (14), and European Sisters can learn much from them in terms of encounter.

Along the same lines, PK (16) refers to Pope Francis and emphasises that encounter is an important way of being in mission: “We need to encounter each other, ... know each other, enter into relationships with respect ...” (PK 16).

Although PC (13) does not mention the word encounter, she speaks of “getting closer [to people].” The above-mentioned three Sisters use the term *prossimità* in referring to encounter.

In the section on encounter with otherness (5.2.1), the importance of *being with* people emerged clearly. Now for some Sisters, *being with* rather than *doing* is a transformative way of being in mission. For PC (11), “at times, you do not know what to say ... but you are there.”

PA (14) wonders “what is the new type of being in mission? ... Maybe it’s again that *being*.” PG (15) is also convinced that what is important is “our way of being in mission ... I think that we will not do many things but ... we will be with others.”

Once again, for transformative mission, *being with* the others is considered more important and relevant than any project that can be implemented.

#### 5.10.4 What kind of communities and where?

With regard to the kind of community the Sisters could in the future live in, the possibility of inter-congregational communities was earlier raised (5.2.1). That is a new style of community for the congregation.

From the interviews, it emerges that there is, to a certain extent, a lack of openness of our communities. Some Sisters identify a more open style of community as a relevant way of being in mission. The way the communities are presently structured, seems to prevent greater collaboration with lay people. PF is very clear: “It is the structure! Because the community ... has its structure with prayer times, timetable ... We have to give a little protection to our schedule ...” (PF 10). In this context, PJ identifies the need to “to see how our communities can be restructured, to be more open, also simpler in the structures” (PJ 12).

We have seen earlier that PD is convinced of the priority of encounter. However, she also recognises the structures often create obstacles but “I do not say to destroy the structures we have, but to use them differently. We need the courage to be in constant closeness [*prossimità*] to people” (PD 12). For this reason, she wishes that “our communities should be more open.”

In order to be closer to people, PM (15) emphasises the importance of small communities, “small Cenacles,<sup>145</sup> because big structures also mean big communities ... I want a simpler lifestyle ... and more meaningful one.”

The choice of living and being of service on the peripheries is the way that PK (16) identifies as relevant for mission. She also suggests that this choice implies that “[we must] be there, incarnate more and more in the reality, and learn from the least, the poor ...” Likewise, PM (14) speaks of the need of being “inserted in the reality ... knowing that we must be open, see other ways ... other life-styles.”

Living on the peripheries of big cities is not new for the Congregation. It is important to recognise that the choice to do so is increasingly favoured by the Sisters. For example, the community of PF (1) has made the decision to move to the periphery

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<sup>145</sup> The meaning of communities as *Cenacles* is explained in Chapter Four (4.3.2.3).



of a capital city where people live in very poor conditions. This choice seems to be prophetic in a time in which cities grow bigger and bigger due to the influx of people coming from rural areas, or of immigrants and of refugees, which creates entire areas of poor and marginalised people. What seems to be missing, from the Sisters' side, is a proper reflection on the implication that this phenomenon has in regard to mission. On the peripheries of big cities or in big urban settings, "the trinity of language, custom, and territory breaks down." In such settings a bounded territory is no longer experienced and "customs and language get even intermingled with competing 'cultures'" (Schreiter 2012:279). In turn, in these settings, identities are no longer integral and integrated but become hybrid.<sup>146</sup> The challenge of how to approach such realities has to be seriously considered by the Sisters. I will expand on this matter in Chapter Six.

PN summarises all the characteristics that the communities should possess in order to be a relevant presence in today's world:

We have to return to the essentiality ... It is difficult to get away from many structures that we put up and must maintain ... We should maybe identify ourselves with this: being with the last, the poor ... I dream of small communities where we share, where, together with the people, we seek to grow, and to find together what can give life in abundance ... We need to make common cause, especially in the most difficult and farthest places, that is, where people have no chance to be in contact with signs of hope, signs of solidarity, with someone who gets close (PN 15).

Great emphasis is set by PD on the relationships within the communities: "our relationships should make a qualitative leap. They should be more genuine" (PD 13), otherwise community life could remain at a superficial and not a qualitative level. She continues: "I would start more from spirituality and mission in order to give a new and qualitative face to our community relationships" (PD 13).

The importance of working and evangelising together as community is emphasised by two Sisters. For PJ (11), "it is the community of Sisters that witnesses that ministry. It is the community that is committed, not the single Sister." Similarly, PG (16) stresses that an important strategy is that "we cannot do everything alone ...

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<sup>146</sup> Schreiter (2012:279-280) mentions the four characteristics of how cultures undergo a change due to globalisation. 1) *Homogenisation* that is, when the powerful global forces delete local cultural identities. 2) *Hyperdifferentiation*: the segmentation of society due to all the possibilities on offer. 3) *Deterritorialisation*: Identity is no longer provided by a place and, therefore, people become disoriented. This is particularly true for migrants, refugees and displaced. 4) *Hybridity*: "elements that were previously discrete are now mixed together through culture contact, multicultural societies, and acute displacement by war or natural disasters" (:280).

We are not alone ... We need to learn that we are an evangelising community.” And this excludes any form of negative *protagonism*.

During the General Chapter of 2016, this idea of *evangelising together as community* emerged very strongly (CA 2016:3.4, 8.1, 9.2, 13.2). A contribution to this idea was also the sharing of the experiences of encounter that each community made before the General Chapter, as I explained in Chapter Four (4.5.2). From those experiences, the Sisters discovered the “call to evangelize as community” (CA 2016:9.1). They also “appreciated the beauty of going out and meeting others *together*, of evaluating the experience *together*, recognizing and sharing deep feelings” (CA 2016:9.2). In the section of the Acts of the Chapter entitled “Towards a charismatic ministeriality” (CA 2016:13), they emphasise that evangelisation must be done as community. *Ministeriality* has to be lived together, that is, “ministerial projects will be shared in community” (CA 2016:13.2). This way of being in mission by evangelising as community, seems to be relevant both for the Sisters and their communities and for genuine credibility of their witness.

### **5.10.5 Discernment**

Earlier in this chapter (5.5.2), I illustrated that the Sisters identify discernment as a challenge in their lives. They recognise a certain insufficiency of discernment in the Congregation too. Some also mention discernment as one of the ways of being in mission.

PF, who asked why I did not put a specific question about discernment, and who held a firm view that the Congregation was lacking in this respect, states that “each one of us has to walk the path of personal discernment” (PF 13) in order to change first oneself, before being able to bring about changes in society. For her, discernment must start at a personal level.

PJ speaks of discernment in relation to *ministeriality*. She identifies discernment as something that must be practised, therefore, it can be considered a relevant way of being in mission. She states: “We need to undergo a discernment about our presence; [such discernment] can tell us how we want to be present today” (PJ 13). It is important to stress that for PJ, discernment is not simply personal. Rather it has to start from the “point of view of the Church, and of the people that host us ...” (PJ 13). This means that

people must be part of the process of discernment. PD (12) says it clearly: “We have to abandon the idea of going to a place and interpreting the needs of the people. We have to let people say what they expect of us.” Her point of view is of paramount importance. In fact, projects are often started “but we have thought out and created them, whilst people [just] observe us” (PD 12). PD, therefore, proposes a humbler presence enabling the encounter with people. She speaks of a “*ministeriality* also done with projects.” However, she emphasises that these projects “must really come from the reflection of ... the people, and not only from our assessment of the needs of the people” (PD 12).

### **5.10.6 Evaluation**

Another important way of being in mission is engaging in evaluation, which is part of reflexivity. Two Sisters recognise that, in the Congregation, there is a certain lack of evaluation of what is carried out. “Something that we are lacking is [the practice of] evaluation!” says PM and she wonders whether “we have to continue in this way” (PM 14). PO also complains about the lack of evaluation: “there is one thing that we do very little of: evaluation” (PO 9).

PJ goes a step further. Just as PD insisted on the importance of a discernment done in conjunction with people, PJ insists on an evaluation done with and by the people. For a presence to be relevant, listening is of paramount importance, “but this relevant presence must be evaluated. We must give the people the possibility of evaluating us” (PJ 11). Projects, structures, works and the people who work with or for them, are generally evaluated by the Sisters, “we are less likely to let others evaluate us” (PJ 11).

This important aspect of evaluation by others had already been emphasised by Brambilla and, subsequently, in the Acts of the Chapter of 2010, on which I reported in Chapter Four (4.5.6). Analysis of the interviews shows that evaluation by others is a relevant way of being in mission, but in this respect, the Congregation has still a way to go.

### 5.10.7 Empowerment

Earlier in this chapter (5.2.2) we have seen the importance of empowerment in a two-way encounter. Two Sisters indicate empowerment as a relevant way of being in mission. PM emphasises that the Sisters should “go back to Comboni’s methodology ... save Africa by Africa, Ecuador by Ecuador, wherever one is ...” (PM 15).

PA, also recalling Comboni, uses the term empowerment and emphasises that “it’s important to enable people to ... do their part, to play their role” (PA 15) and, therefore, for us to discard *protagonism*.

PE (11-12) does not speak of empowerment as such, but mentions the importance of accompanying new emerging situations. Taking the example of young people who want to study, she says “people are taking initiatives and there are things that we see that are good things, that need to be encouraged and maybe we need to help with the possibilities that we have ...”

### 5.10.8 Back to evangelisation

Sisters in mission have many commitments notably in the areas of education, social work and health.<sup>147</sup> PD and PN call this into question. PD emphasises the need of being present as consecrated women: “we are not there only as social workers, who give answers to social problems. We are there also as consecrated women” (PD 4). She desires that people “do not come to us because of money or social problems ... but that through us they may encounter the God of life” (PD 4). PD affirms this when talking about challenges. Enabling such encounter is, however, a way of being in mission, and it seems there is a need to go back to it.

PN is much more direct and stresses the need to go back to evangelisation: “as a Congregation we say that we are missionaries. We are very involved in projects, campaigns ... We invest a lot in social issues. That’s fine, but I think that we invest very little in evangelisation” (PN 15). She accentuates the Word of God that must be studied and shared with people. “This Word that gave meaning to your lives ... can give

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<sup>147</sup> The last Acts of the Chapter give a statistic regarding the professional preparation of the Sisters operating in the various continents. Here are the details: Education/Human sciences 274 Sisters; Health 216 Sisters; Theology/pastoral work 95 Sisters; Social work/Women’s promotion/Law/Media 126 Sisters; Accounting/Administration/Management 44 Sisters (CA 2016:2.5).

meaning also to the lives of others” (PN 15). Toward the end of the interview, PN expands this concept of evangelisation by emphasising that it is important to “re-read the events in which we are involved” (PN 17). Through the lens of the Combonian charism, it is essential “to read the experiences, the *now* of God” and see how “God’s promise is realised in these events” (PN 17). In a word, evangelisation is also “to find signs of God’s promise in the lives of people” as well as in their life events and in history (PN 17).

### **5.10.9 Back to charism and spirituality**

In this chapter, we have seen how the Sisters endeavour to live the charism and the mission spirituality of Comboni. Some Sisters emphasise that a return to the charism and to spirituality is essential for a transformative mission.

PN acknowledges the studies done by the Congregation on its history, on the history of the first Sisters, and of those who suffered under the Mahdist revolution. However, she emphasises that today it is not enough to read books about those Sisters. It is important that “someone might open a future ... or that together we might find a way ... a language ... to keep the charism alive ... But how to incarnate it? How to think it for the future? And also how to offer it to the young people?” (PN 17).

PO likewise calls for a return to the charism. She emphasises that “we did not study in depth the fatherhood of Comboni ... that emerges much from his spirituality. He was a father to the people” (PO 11). To this fatherhood of Comboni, she links the importance of reflecting on motherhood “because we created sterile images of mission. We did, did, did, but we did not generate” (PO 11). Where the *doing* becomes the only way of being in mission, mission becomes sterile and not generative. She therefore suggests that the Congregation should “reflect on motherhood and fatherhood, that is, on how to be mothers in the true sense of the word” (PO 11) Earlier in this chapter I dealt with the meaning of *motherhood* for the Sisters (5.6.1).

Another means of paramount importance for transformative mission for PO, relates to spirituality: “We must not be afraid of contemplative times ... times of prayer, times of contemplation ... of the reality, also times of contemplation of failure, times of contemplation of the questions ... and not having answers” (PO 12). She brings to mind that both Jesus and Comboni used to withdraw by themselves to pray. Following their

example, it is essential “to have contemplative times as a discipline” (PO 12). Comboni was very clear and determined on this. He wanted his missionaries to “keep their eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, loving him tenderly ...” (Rules of 1871, in *Writings*:2721). And the Sisters throughout the history of the Congregation have emphasised it in their documents (Chapter Four).

For PK too, the Sisters have “to always rediscover the spiritual dimension, when maybe this slips away, [or] when one gets caught up in the work” (PK 16).

The above-mentioned Sisters speak of a return to the charism and spirituality. I conclude this part on new ways of being in mission with the comment given by PD, because it is relevant for the kind of presence the Comboni Missionary Sisters must be. When talking about the inseparability of mission and spirituality, she compares them to two lungs (PD 7). Now, she concludes that “We need to be a presence that makes more visible this spiritual lung that we live, because the social commitment emerges too much” (PD 12). Making visible this “spiritual lung” necessarily includes the attitudes for mission mentioned above.

Finally, the questions that PD then raises remain the ones that have to be asked about the way of being in mission. According to her, it is the commitment to social projects that emerges: “Many know us only because of this ... What did we do, or not do, that people encounter only the aspect of our presences that is more social and material? How to engage so that, in future, our mission may show in a clearer and more visible manner spirituality that is part of us, that is essential, that is the motor?” (PD 12-13).

#### **5.10.10 New ways of being in mission: Concluding comments**

Analysis of the interviews showed that new ways of being in mission are, for the Sisters, more about attitudes than about strategies or particular areas of action.

*Protagonism* (with the negative connotation that the Sisters give to the term) is incompatible with collaboration with others (lay people, local Church, other congregations) which is instead characterised by humility and simplicity. The focus of encounter is more on *being with* than on *doing*. Closeness (*prossimità*) to people is of paramount importance.

Small communities of Sisters, flexible in structure and more open to the people, are considered a more relevant means of presence. Likewise, small communities living on the peripheries of cities are preferable and give witness that is more effective. Of importance, too, is the quality of relationship among the Sisters, as well as their commitment to evangelise together as a community. Personal and community discernment has to play a greater role in their lives. Moreover, the Sisters desire to involve people in the discernment on the kind of presence called for. The importance of evaluation of presence and activities is emphasised. The Sisters also advocate an evaluation in which the people are engaged. Empowerment of people is essential. A call to return to evangelisation, and not only being committed to social issues, seems to be one of the ways of being in mission. Of paramount importance for transformative mission is the return to the charism and to spirituality. This *return* to evangelisation, charism and spirituality certainly does not mean that other areas have to be left behind. However, it seems that there is a need for spirituality and charism to be more visible in the service the Sisters are giving, because they are, to a certain extent, lacking. In this regard, we can say with Luzbetak (1988:243-244) that all linkages must be taken into consideration (by the Sisters) at religious, social and economic level, by dealing with the culture *in loco* and with culture as a whole. In this regard, the words of Garret Harden (in Luzbetak 1988:223) say it all: “You can never do merely one thing.”

To conclude this part of the chapter it is worth mentioning the view of the *Aparecida Document*. It states that “mission is not limited to a program or project, but it is sharing the experience of the event of the encounter with Christ, witnessing it and announcing it from person to person, from community to community, and from the Church to the ends of the earth” (AD 145).

## **5.11 Concluding comments**

This chapter has analysed and elaborated the interviews conducted with fifteen Comboni Missionary Sisters.

From the analysis, one can detect that the Sisters try to live their encounters with people in a genuine way. These encounters and the context in which they live and work, have led them to personal transformation in life, in ways of thinking and doing mission

and in their spirituality. At the same time, spirituality is shaping their way of being in mission.

Their own thinking about the context in which they live and minister, appears not to amount to great in-depth analysis. The Sisters do seem to have a genuine passion for the charism and the mission spirituality of their founder, which lead to their profound involvement in mission. However, in the analysis of the interviews the need and, consequently, the desire for deeper reflection and discernment on mission and spirituality are revealed. The Sisters are aware that mission and spirituality go hand in hand and cannot be separated. The concept of *ministeriality* serves to integrate the two.

The last part of the chapter has dealt with the new ways considered relevant by the Sisters for transformative mission. They have dwelt more on attitudes than on concrete areas of commitment.

In the next Chapter, I will integrate earlier learning and will use the mission spirituality spiral as a mobilising tool.



# Chapter 6

## Toward a transformative mission spirituality

### 6.1 Introduction

I started this research contending that spirituality is the *motor* of mission (1.1) and that missiology and spirituality have to be brought into conversation. This need emerged also from the fact that the literature review showed that missiological books and articles generally do not (explicitly) take spirituality into consideration (1.9.1). As for authors who explicitly consider spirituality as a central dimension of mission and missiology, some do not engage in depth with spirituality e.g. Buono, Karotrempe, Contran (1.9.1).

The same applies to spirituality authors who do not (explicitly) engage with missiology e.g. Waaijman Schneiders, Rakoczy, Kourie & Kretzschmar (1.9.2).

That spirituality is the *motor* of mission has clearly emerged from the exploration of Comboni's mission spirituality (3.4), which led him to draw-up the *Plan for the Regeneration of Africa* (3.3.6), and to give his whole life for mission in Central Africa. Exploration of the history and official documents of the Comboni Missionary Sisters (Chapter Four), as well as the analysis of the interviews with fifteen Sisters (Chapter Five), also showed that spirituality is the *motor* of mission.

Exploration of mission (2.2) and spirituality (2.3) led to the insight that the two have the same core experience: encountering the Triune God (2.2.3; 2.3.9). All the various facets of mission, that is, the various "mission *as...*" dimensions (2.2.1) flow from this core.

This, in turn, led to the insight that mission and spirituality are linked and inseparable. From there, the concept of *mission spirituality* emerged as constitutive of a mission that cannot be separated from spirituality. The two constitute an integrated whole (2.4). The Sisters interviewed also expressed the inseparability of spirituality and mission (5.7.3), although there remains, for them, the challenge to verbalise how this happens in everyday life (5.7.1).

I proposed that mission spirituality can be understood, studied and lived by using the *mission spirituality spiral* that I elaborated drawing on the *pastoral circle* of Holland and Henriot and on further developments (2.4.1.1).

Making use of the interpretative paradigm (1.2), in Chapter Three, I engaged with both Comboni's life (3.3) and mission spirituality (3.4). I then dealt with the mission spirituality that the Comboni Missionary Sisters developed from their founder's charism and legacy (Chapter Four). In Chapter Five, I engaged with the life and mission spirituality of fifteen Comboni Missionary Sisters, by analysing the interviews held with them. In these three chapters the approach consisted of an empathetic understanding (1.2) of the everyday life of both Comboni and the Sisters, in the attempt to understand and interpret their experiences. I explored the Sisters' mission spirituality (4.4.4; 4.5.1), in order to understand how they seek to be faithful to Comboni's charism and, at the same time, to be a relevant presence where they live and serve in mission. In these three chapters, I used the mission spirituality spiral as an analytical tool to study the mission spirituality of Comboni (3.5) and of the Comboni Missionary Sisters (4.5; Chapter Five). This tool proved to be good for that part of the study.

The epistemological framework of *critical realism* of Wright (1.5) has accompanied the whole of the research, with the awareness that I, as researcher, could not be completely objective, and that I was involved in a process of knowing (and learning) from other scholars and from the Sisters interviewed. Being a member of the Comboni Missionary Sisters made me an *insider*, and being the researcher, made me an *outsider*. This meant that I had to occupy, as Corbin Dwyer and Buckle call it, the "space between" the two (1.7.2) with all the advantages and disadvantages involved. I spent some time considering my presence from the beginning of the research, over the interviews, their analysis and interpretation. I came to realise how my experience and my understanding, at times, of the research topic was influencing my opinion on the Congregation and on the Sisters' sharing. Awareness of my biases, prejudices and stances helped me to make the necessary revisions in rendering the description and the analysis of the interviews.

Knowing that "reflexivity and sensitivity are closely intertwined," I engaged in the encounter with the Sisters during the interviews in a way that it then allowed me to describe that encounter and, at the same time, to be "*co-creator* of the mode and content of the encounter ... [and] of the narrative that is the product of the research encounter" (Swinton & Mowat 2006:61).

Through effective social involvement (1.5), challenges in mission have been identified by the Sisters interviewed (5.5) and subsequently new ways of being in mission have been proposed (5.10).

Having used the spiral as an analytical instrument thus far in my thesis, in this chapter I turn to using it in an empowering and mobilising way, to do some constructive theological reflection and make practical proposals for the way ahead for the discernment of relevant and transformative ways of being in mission for the Comboni Missionary Sisters.

This mobilising tool, like the praxis matrix of Kritzinger (1.9.1), integrates theology and practice of mission. Moreover, interface and mutual shaping of mission and spirituality, as called for by Karecki (1.9.1), occur in the spiral. The spiral allows reflection and engagement in mission through the lived experience of a series of encounters with the Triune God, with the other(s), with the context, and with Scripture and Tradition. It is a process that starts from *below*, from the context in which one lives and serves, as proposed by liberation theologians like Gutiérrez and Boff (1.10.5).

In this chapter, I first formulate some emerging key issues for the Comboni Missionary Sisters and I deal with them in the course of the chapter. I do so in order to find ways to overcome them.

Thereafter, I engage with the spiral as a mobilising tool and finally I propose the possible way ahead for the Comboni Missionary Sisters.

## **6.2 Emerging issues for the Comboni Missionary Sisters**

In the study of the Sisters' mission spirituality and in the analysis of the interviews, a number of issues emerged. I deal with these issues one by one in the course of this chapter.

The first issue is the dichotomy, which I discuss below in 6.4, between spirituality and mission that emerged from the official documents of the Sisters and from the interviews. In the preceding chapters (Four and Five) I have investigated whether and how the Sisters live the dimensions of the mission spirituality spiral whilst being in mission. The emerging result is that they use and live all the dimensions, but that they do it only sporadically. They use and live one or the other, or some of them simultaneously. Yet, these do not seem to be linked and to flow in and out of one

another. As a result, the Sisters experience a kind of fragmentation in their *doing* and *being* in mission, or, in other words, a sort of dichotomy.

The second issue that arose from the interviews and that requires reflection in this chapter is the importance of context analysis, which I discuss in 6.3.3 below. The importance of context analysis is recognised in the official documents (4.5.3). However, from the interviews it does not seem that serious and intentional context analysis is frequently practiced by the Sisters (5.3.1; 5.3.2).

The third issue that I address in this chapter is discernment (6.3.5.1). Although it has a prominent place in the official documents of the Congregation (4.5.5), the Sisters interviewed have identified a certain *lack* of discernment in the Congregation (5.5.1).

The fourth issue is evaluation. The official documents of the Congregation (4.5.6) emphasise the importance of evaluating the work done and the quality of presence in mission. Evaluation by others is strongly advocated as well (CA 2010:23). Yet, the Sisters interviewed maintain that evaluation is not practiced regularly in the Congregation (5.10.6). I discuss this issue below in 6.3.6.

The fifth issue emerging from the interviews is the need for the Sisters to reflect in more depth on the term *ministeriality*, and therefore, on mission and spirituality. I discuss this below in 6.3.5.1.

At this point, one can certainly object that it might be too presumptuous to assert that the above issues concern the whole Congregation that totals about 1250 members, whilst the Sisters interviewed were only fifteen. I am not claiming that these five issues that have emerged as priorities from these interviews necessarily apply to all members or Provinces of the Congregation. As a qualitative study, it raises in-depth questions, without claiming to be representative. However, the presence of some present and former Provincial Superiors in the group ensures that the views expressed do not represent a marginal minority (1.7.1).

In this chapter, I use the mission spirituality spiral as an animating and mobilising tool in order to help the Comboni Missionary Sisters to face and overcome the issues that have emerged above.

### 6.3 Using the *mission spirituality spiral* as a mobilising tool

Analysis of the interviews has shown that the new ways of being in mission suggested by the Sisters corresponded in most cases to the challenges experienced in mission and expressed either explicitly or implicitly as such.

In using the spiral as a mobilising tool in this chapter, I follow a four-point structure when discussing each dimension: the starting point will be the positives or strengths that emerge from the study on Comboni and the Sisters in regard to that dimension. Then I explore the challenges or weaknesses and their possible causes, in dialogue with some missiological scholars. Finally, I look at suggestions for a possible way forward for the Comboni Missionary Sisters.

However, the dimension of encounter will be dealt with in a slightly different way. The dimension of spirituality, at the heart of the spiral, as well, needs to be approached differently. Now I begin by looking at spirituality in relation to the mission spiral.

#### 6.3.1 Spirituality

Defining spirituality as the *motor* of mission does not mean that it is merely the starter, or initiator of mission. Rather, it means that spirituality, understood as encounter with the Triune God, is present throughout the spiral. Spirituality is, in fact, an ongoing experience, involving the whole person (Schneiders 2.3.5). It involves the relationship with the Absolute (Waaijman 2.3.5), participation in the life of the Trinity (Cunningham & Egan, Sheldrake 2.3.5) that brings about self-transformation (Coleman, McGinn, Schneiders 2.3.5); integration (Sheldrake 2.3.5). Spirituality informs the whole of life, produces freedom (Gutiérrez 2.3.5) and necessarily aspires to enhance and promote dignity, especially of the poor and marginalised (Boff 2.3.5). For these reasons, spirituality informs the whole spiral. Without spirituality in the dimensions of the spiral, one could certainly *do* many (good) things but, to borrow the words of PD (13), in his/her *doing* people would “encounter only the bodywork” and not the *motor*.

Thus, it becomes clear that I cannot separate spirituality from the other dimensions of the spiral. Rather, I have to deal with spirituality in each of the dimensions, showing how it informs and shapes them. The first sub-section of each

dimension of the spiral is therefore devoted to the role of spirituality in each dimension. Moreover, when dealing with each dimension, suggestions are made on how Comboni and the Sisters' spirituality can be of help.

### **6.3.2 Encounter**

In Chapter One (1.10.4) and Chapter Two (2.4.2.2), I have introduced the term *encounter* with its criteria as the second dimension of the spiral. A genuine mission encounter is moved and inspired by the Holy Spirit; it is a *two-way* encounter; it is creative; it enhances transformation in the interlocutors; and it “privileges” the poor and marginalised. Below I explore its importance in the spiral, when it is used in a mobilising way.

#### **6.3.2.1 The role of spirituality in encounter**

Spirituality informs mission encounters in a particular way. At the core of spirituality, in fact, there is an encounter: the encounter with the Triune God (2.3.9). From the relationality and the mutual indwelling of the Trinity, one – moved and inspired by the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:26-40) (2.4.2.2) – is similarly called to live this relationality and indwelling with others (Cunningham 2.4.2.1). In the encounter and relationship with the Triune God, one experiences being a son or a daughter of God. One is then called to encounter others as brothers and sisters (Comboni 3.4.2) “created in God’s image and likeness” (Comboni to Msgr. Giovanni Agnozzi 29.6.1877, in *Writings*:4641), not as strangers or *others* in a negative way (Schreiter 5.2). Moreover, the *uniqueness* of the relationship with God leads to the *uniqueness* of the relationship with others (Zizioulas 5.2). In the encounter with God, one enters a mystery. Similarly, in each *unique* encounter with others, one must be aware that, to borrow PE’s words, it means “to enter into something that is mysterious” (PE 8, 5.2.1), before whom awe and wonder are essential (Karecki 5.2.1).

A spirituality of encounter, proposed by the Acts of the Chapter of 2016 (CA 2016:4.1, 5.1), recalls the importance of the encounter with oneself, God, others and creation. It is a spirituality that, in faithfulness to Comboni, seeks to fix one’s eyes on Jesus on the Cross. By embodying the attitudes of the Good Shepherd who gives his life

for all people. The Sisters are called to be those *women of encounter* who have to protect and nurture life (CA 2016:1.1).

### **6.3.2.2 Encounter as a mobilising dimension: Attitudes and participation in others' lives**

The dimension of encounter, as indicated above, is also dealt with in a slightly different way. In this first section, I deal with the attitudes that are lived by the sisters and that they propose as important for their being in mission. In the following sections, I engage with specific areas linked to the dimension of encounter.

Encounter with others means participation in the lives of others (Schrey 1.10.4). In order to achieve this participation in the lives of others, the Sisters try to live their encounters in mission with attitudes of simplicity, humility, *being with*, closeness, listening, respect and trust (5.2.1; 5.2.2) that discard a negative *protagonism* (5.4.4). The Sisters also propose these attitudes as transformative and new ways of being in mission (5.10.1; 5.10.3).

Genuine encounters are made of a *two-way* or a *give-and-receive* dynamic, which is one of the criteria that defines a genuine mission encounter (1.10.4). The Sisters (PG 7; PD 9; PK 5-6, 5.2.2) recognise the importance of this dynamic in their encounters that results in empowerment of people (5.2.2). At the same time, PM (15) and PA (15) propose the empowerment of people deriving from this dynamic as a relevant way of being in mission (5.10.7). This important way finds its roots in Comboni's methodology "Save Africa by Africa" that was one of the aims of his *Plan* (3.3.6.1). In this respect, the importance of avoiding any kind of *paternalism* or *maternalism* (Bonk, Kipoy 5.5.1) is something that a number of Sisters have identified as a temptation to be avoided, if their service in mission is to be fruitful.

When encountering others, one of the challenges that emerges is powerlessness in the face of the many difficult situations in mission. The Sisters, however, are able to find solutions in order to overcome it (5.5.2).

In the experience of powerlessness, weakness and vulnerability, one is called to choose *kenosis*, which necessarily requires humility (Bosch 1.9.1; Keum 2.2.1.5; Comboni 3.4.3; Sr. Teresa Grigolini 4.3.2.1). The experience of *kenosis* brings about self-transformation and transformation in society (Banawiratma 5.5.2), thus fulfilling

one of the criteria that defines a genuine mission encounter. The attitude of trust in God (PA 7; Pope John XXIII, 5.4.3) that discards resignation and fatalism, becomes essential.

In their encounters and participation in others' lives, the sisters can deepen the metaphor of *embrace* by Volf (5.2.3), which provides a powerful example of closeness (*prossimità*) and empowerment.

### **6.3.2.3 Encounter with others in collaboration**

Genuine encounter opens the door to collaboration. The Sisters report some positive and enriching experiences of collaboration (5.2.2). However, at times, collaboration with the Sisters from their own community (PA 13), with lay people (PF 9; PG 16) and with the local church (PA 16) can be a challenge. The causes of the difficulty in living collaboration are various in nature: desire for power, control, or personality issues from the Sisters' side (PA 13); widespread clericalism (PC 11; PA 16) and lack of enough trust in the people (PF 10) (5.10.1).

Collaboration that is working with others, the local lay people and the local church, as well as other congregations is acknowledged by the Sisters as one of the new ways of being in mission (5.10.1). This is not just because it is a way to overcome the powerlessness that is often experienced in mission. Rather, it is Comboni's legacy (3.3.6.2; 3.3.7). He wanted his missionaries to *work with* others for the sake of mission.

Collaboration with other congregations (5.10.2) is also suggested as a new way of being in mission. It implies witnessing and sharing the charism of one's own congregation. Through encounters and collaboration with other congregations, "spiritual and charismatic richness" (PF 9, 5.10.2) is experienced and positive and fruitful responses to the needs of the people can be found.

In order for collaboration to happen and to be fruitful, living the attitudes mentioned above is essential.

### **6.3.2.4 Encounter across cultures**

Being able to communicate with local people in their language is crucial if one wants to establish profound and fruitful relationships with them. However, mastering a



foreign (and often difficult) language and understanding in depth another culture is quite a challenge (Luzbetak 5.5.3) that missionaries experience.

The Sisters are aware of the importance of knowing a local language and culture and some regret their lack knowledge in these areas (PH 6; PE 2; PA 13, 5.5.3).

Possible causes for the lack of sufficient knowledge of a local language may be traced to the fact that, at times, a Sister remains in the same place in mission for too short a time and then she is appointed somewhere else. Another contingent cause is the fact that in some areas different languages are spoken within a few kilometres (PK 4; PE 3, 5.5.3). I myself experienced this in Chad and, to a certain extent, I am experiencing it in the township of Mamelodi, where a concentration of various languages and cultures is present.

Although closeness and empathy are of the utmost importance when encountering people, the study of local languages and cultures is essential in order to allow deeper and more genuine encounters with the people. This said, it seems that the Sisters should take the learning of languages and cultures more seriously.

Over thirty years ago, the Church chose inculturation among the principal activities for mission (2.2). The encounter with other cultures necessarily involves inculturation. It is part of missiology that deals at an academic level with the encounter with other cultures. *Redemptoris missio* (RM 52-54) dedicates a section to the importance of inculturation, which is “the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures.”

Especially in the present time in which, as Schreier (5.10.4) emphasises, identities become hybrid, local cultures are erased, society is fragmented and a place does not provide identity, it is important for missiology to deal with these issues. The Sisters, as well, have to engage with them by the help of cultural, social studies and insights from anthropology.

An approach to anthropology does not seem to be recommended by the Congregation (5.5.3). It seems therefore important for the Sisters to be offered the opportunity to benefit from the insights of anthropology and other sciences in their mission encounters. This would provide a better understanding of humanity and cultures, thus, enhancing genuine mission encounters and living *interculturality* both *ad intra* and *ad extra* (5.5.3) positively and fruitfully.

In addition to this, the image of the “Cenacle” that Comboni advocated for the communities of his missionaries (4.3.2.3) can help the Sisters to live interculturality *ad intra* positively and fruitfully.

### **6.3.2.5 Encounter with other Christian denominations**

Exposure to and encounter with, other Christian denominations are experiences that the Sisters have almost everywhere in mission. However, in the interviews only a few Sisters mention these experiences.

Through exposure to other Christian denominations and praying together at funerals or other celebrations (PA 10, 5.4.4), minds are opened to new horizons creating new perspectives and possibilities for ecumenism, which is relevant both in everyday life and in the future of missiology (Verstraelen et al 1.10.1). Working in ecumenical circles fosters that collaboration that is the fruit of a genuine and transformative mission encounter (1.11.4).

### **6.3.2.6 Encounter with other faiths**

Exposure to other faiths is also an experience of the Sisters in the Congregation. However, in this case only two Sisters recall their experience. On the one hand, it represents a challenge for the Sisters and is simultaneously a calling to a “dialogue of life” (PO 3, 5.5.4) that helps to look at, consider and treat believers of other faiths as children of God (PI 3, 5.4.4). The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, reminds Christians that they have to enter into “dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, [and these have to be] carried out with prudence and love” (NA 2). It is through this exposure to other faiths that mission encounter with its peculiarity (1.10.4) becomes particularly important and leads to mission as *missio inter gentes* (2.2.1.8).

It is worth recalling the importance of critically reflecting on these encounters with other Christian denominations or faiths, both at an academic level (Kritzinger 1.10.4) and in everyday life.

The document *Dialogue and Proclamation* by the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue recalls the four types of interreligious dialogue (DP 42). These can

help the Sisters when engaging in interreligious dialogue. The *dialogue of life*, which is mentioned above by a sister, can be lived in everyday life, in informal encounters. By means of the *dialogue of action*, the Sisters can collaborate with believers of other faiths “for the integral development and liberation of people.” Thus, together they can bring about that *regeneration* that was a firm point in Comboni’s missionary life and especially in this Plan (3.3.6).

The third type is “the *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other’s spiritual values.” The fourth type is the *dialogue of religious experience*, where there is a sharing of their spiritual riches. In this respect, the Sisters need to become fully aware that we are living in an *interspiritual age* (Kourie 2.3.10). A well-lived *interspirituality* (Teasdale 2.3.10) has the potential of enhancing one’s own faith, of mutual enrichment and of promoting that collaboration that the Sisters consider a new way of being in mission at various levels in society.

### **6.3.2.7 Encounter by making *common cause***

One of the dimensions of Comboni’s spirituality was “making common cause” (Homily of Khartoum 11.5.1873, in *Writings*:3159) with the poorest and most marginalised. It permeated his whole life as a missionary (3.4.3) and was taken up by the Sisters in their official documents (4.5.2.1; 4.5.2.2). Most of the Sisters interviewed speak of making *common cause* with the poor and marginalised as an important dimension in their spirituality and in everyday life (5.6.1). They commit “to *make common cause* with the peoples to whom we are sent” (CA 1992:I.C.2). If on the one hand, how to make *common cause* with the people can be a challenge, on the other hand, making *common cause* especially with the poor and marginalised is, in one way or the other, advocated by all the Sisters interviewed as essential for their way of being in mission (5.2.1; 5.6.1). Comboni’s spirituality of the Sacred Heart (3.4.2) can be of help for the Sisters in making common cause especially with the poor and marginalised. The Heart of Jesus, in fact, beats for all. Through it, all are considered brothers and sisters.

The Sisters cannot but continuously make *common cause* especially with the poor and marginalised in faithfulness to the Gospel, to the Church’s teaching (Pope Francis

2.4.2.2; Liberation theologians 2.2.1.6), to Comboni's legacy (The Plan 1864, in *Writings*:809), and to fulfil the requirements of a transformative encounter (2.4.2.2).

### **6.3.2.8 Encountering disoriented people**

Disorientation experienced by people, especially youth (Arbuckle 5.5.5), is, in our time, something that the Sisters have to deal with. Both PJ (3) and PK (6) indicate that they are able to respond to this situation by accompanying people in their difficult life journey with attitudes of closeness or *prossimità* (Pope Francis 5.2.1) and empathy (Luzbetak 5.2.1). These attitudes, that are those of the Good Shepherd with the Pierced Heart, are lived by the Sisters and are proposed as essential for transformative ways of being in mission (5.10.4).

Without denying the relevance of these inalienable attitudes, a suggestion can be made for the Sisters. More comprehensive knowledge of the relationship between culture and globalisation (Schreiter 5.10.4) can, in fact, help the Sisters to better understand the underlying causes of this disorientation and consequently to be more effective in reaching out to people who experience disorientation.

### **6.3.2.9 Encounter: Concluding comments**

As for encounter, we can conclude that if all the attitudes mentioned in the above sections (6.3.2) are lived (by the Sisters) in encountering others in their otherness (5.2), all the criteria that constitute a genuine mission encounter (1.10.4; 2.4.2.2) are met. Genuine encounter is one of the dimensions that leads to transformative mission.

Analysis of interviews has shown that encounters with others and the context have brought about transformation in the Sisters. They reported transformation in their spiritual life, in their perceptions of God (5.4.1), in their approach to and their way of living, prayer and liturgy (5.4.2). These transformations at a spiritual level have, in turn, brought about transformation in their lifestyle and therefore in their way of being in mission (5.4.4). Thus, it is important for the Sisters to be aware of the personal transformations they experience, because these can enhance new ways of being in mission.

### **6.3.3 Context analysis**

In Chapter Two (2.4.2.3) I have proposed the context analysis developed by Holland and Henriot as a critical tool to grasp in a more comprehensive way the social situation to be dealt with. It is a critical analysis that does not remain at a *technical* level but is also linked to theological reflection. In fact, when doing context analysis, one brings one's own values and also biases that derive from one's own Christian faith, and from the social teaching of the Church. Also, when doing theological reflection, one brings with oneself some "sociological understandings, e.g. about the structure of the church, the relationship of culture and the Word of God, etc." (Holland & Henriot 1983:103).

#### **6.3.3.1 The role of spirituality in context analysis**

Spirituality accompanies and informs context analysis. God created the world *ex amore* (Sölle, Coda, Delio, Youngs, LaCugna 1.4) and is *continuously* creating the world (Delio 1.4). God is present in the world and can be experienced in everyday life (Tacey, Delio 2.3.8), also in the situations that have to be analysed. Therefore, when doing context analysis, one has to remember that, both the context and situation that are to be analysed, as well as the people living in that context and in that situation, are "holy ground" where God manifests Godself (1.10.4; 2.3.5).

#### **6.3.3.2 Context analysis as a mobilising dimension**

In Chapter Three, I have explored the ability of Comboni in doing context analysis. His analysis was in depth. He firmly believed in the importance of analysing the context. Therefore, he made time for it. He "researched" the context and therefore could "discover" the causes of certain existing problems (3.5.3). Comboni remains for the Sisters a good example as far as context analysis is concerned.

We have seen that since the 1970s, various official documents of the Sisters emphasise the importance of doing a diligent and serious context analysis (4.5.3). However, these documents do not explain how to do it. Moreover, in the past two

editions of the Acts of the Chapters (2010 and 2016) the need for in-depth context analysis is not mentioned.

Reading between the lines of the interviews, one can, at least, detect that context analysis is not easy and therefore might become a challenge. I can say this on the basis of one example. PC (1), who did a fairly good analysis of context, naming a few causes and resulting consequences, including an ecclesial analysis, had not detected the existing need for a health pastoral care in the context in which she lives (5.3.1).

I am not in a position to evaluate why the Sisters described their contexts rather superficially in the interviews (5.3.1; 5.3.2); it may have been because I did not probe this aspect in depth in the interviews, or it may be that in fact they do not take context analysis seriously. Should the latter be the case, its causes might be found in the lack of reflection that, to a certain extent, has been expressed by the Sisters (5.9). This lack of reflection, in turn, seems to be due to the Sisters having too many commitments, which prevents them from stopping to reflect.

Although the importance of context analysis is acknowledged by the Sisters (4.5.3), the obstacles arising in doing it, that is, complexity, controversy, and continuous changes in society (Holland & Henriot 1983:17-18), may also contribute to the fact that context analysis may be put aside.

As Elsener (2005:62-63) wisely emphasises, context analysis does not start from zero. What has already been done in a context, in terms of context analysis, at socio-economic and ecclesial levels, represents an important starting point that needs to be examined and taken into consideration. Revisions and adjustment to it can be done, if needs be. A good context analysis also brings innovation to missiological discourse and mission (Kirk 1.9.1).

An important contribution on shifting from needs analysis to context analysis is provided by Myers (2011:248-250). Needs analysis, in fact, makes those who do it problems solvers. This gives them power and forgets about the importance of seeking what gives life. By doing social, or context analysis, instead, the risk of limiting the responses to social welfare is overcome. Local people are involved in social or context analysis and are empowered in carrying out the transformational process.

With all this in mind, suggestions can be made about context analysis becoming a constant in the Sisters' mission praxis that aims to avoid preconceived ideas of the needs of the people (PD 12, 5.10.5), and that aims to find new and transformative ways of being in mission.

In acknowledging the significance of context analysis, the Sisters may also consider the importance of not focusing only on the charism and its priorities (4.5.3). An in-depth context analysis helps to understand what the real situation of the people is. Thus, they can adapt the charism and its priorities to the situations and the emerging needs, while still preserving faithfulness to it.

The contemplation of the figure of the Good Shepherd (3.4.3) can be of help in context analysis. The Good Shepherd is close to his sheep, knows them (Schneiders, Moloney 2.2.3) and their context. He comes to know the joys and sorrows that the sheep live in their context. These become the joys and sorrows of the Good Shepherd.

### **6.3.3.3 Re-entry disorientation and context analysis**

Another area in which context analysis can be beneficial is the so-called re-entry phase, in which the Sisters experience *reverse culture shock* (Luzbetak, Gullahorn & Gullahorn, Storti, Steffen & McKinney Douglas 5.5.5). The possibility exists for all the Sisters to have to return to their country of origin for some reason or other – sickness, age, appointment there, etc.

In addition to a re-entry *accompaniment* (5.5.5), context analysis will help the Sisters to become more aware of, and familiar with, the changed situation in their country. It will also be of help in acculturating again in their home country and in undergoing a sound process of discernment on the kind of presence they can be there.

### **6.3.3.4 Developing skills for context analysis**

Drawing on Holland and Henriot's work (1983:96-97; 102), a guideline for the Sisters with practical steps in doing context analysis is offered here.

In doing context analysis the Sisters have, first of all, to be clear of, and name, their own biases, stances, values, and beliefs. Secondly, they need to give a comprehensive description of the situation to be analysed (What is happening here?). Thirdly, they need to reflect on some questions, such as: Who are the actors in this situation? Who makes decisions in this situation? Why is this happening? What are the underlying causes? What are the cultural aspects? Why are things done in this way (traditions and ways of relating to each other)? What will this situation be in a few years

if things continue to be done in the same way? What influence does money have in this situation? Each question has to be investigated in more depth by adding the question “Why?”

Involvement of the local people and local church community is essential for a more accurate and germane context analysis. In fact, they know that context better and are the immediate agents in mission who will also benefit from the changes that will come about (Luzbetak, Holland & Henriot 5.3.3).

### **6.3.4 Theological reflection**

The dimension of theological reflection in the spiral is contextualised and starts from *below*, that is, from the spiritual experience and interpretation of Scripture and Tradition of a person or a community in a specific context (2.4.2.4). Although spiritual experience can be considered as not “critical” (Sheldrake 1.1) or “distinctive” enough, people claim its certainty and truth (Perrin, Alston 2.3.6). Because of the ambiguities that spiritual experience bears in itself, its genuineness always needs to be discerned (Perrin, Cunningham & Egan 2.3.6). This experience, brought into dialogue with the situation of the context, the Word of God and Tradition, leads to discernment.

#### **6.3.4.1 The role of spirituality in theological reflection**

The role that spirituality plays in theological reflection is made clear by the above introduction and is shown in the following sections. Theological reflection is grounded in one’s experience of encounter with others, the context, Scripture and Church documents and most importantly, with the Triune God. It happens in a prayerful environment, in which reality is reflected upon in the light of the Word of God or Church documents.

Spirituality is certainly a personal journey (Teasdale 2.3.5), but it is not merely a private experience (Sheldrake 2.3.5). It involves belonging to a community (Kourie, Kretzschmar 1.9.2; Cunningham & Egan, Sheldrake 2.3.5). When doing theological reflection, the sharing of the spiritual experience of the Word of God sheds light on the analysed context, and enhances fruitful insights.



### 6.3.4.2 Theological reflection as a mobilising dimension

Comboni held the study of Scripture as an essential component of mission life and wanted his missionaries to commit themselves to it. He himself was well anchored in Scripture and the teaching of the Church (3.5.4). But it was through his experience of the African context and the analysis of that context that he could link that context and Scripture, by giving a more profound interpretation (3.5.4). As a result, he could discern and find new ways of being in mission (The Plan 3.3.6). Through the circular letter addressed to the Council Fathers (24.6.1870, in *Writings*:2294-2309), that preceded the *Postulatum* (3.3.7), Comboni used biblical texts to shed light on the situation of Central Africa at that time.

Coming to the Sisters, analysis of their official documents (4.5.4) has shown that Scripture and Church documents have been increasingly taken into consideration. However, as these documents are addressed to the Sisters living in various continents, they cannot offer a contextualised theological reflection that can be relevant for all.

Analysis of the interviews shows that Scripture and other spiritual sources touch and positively affect the Sisters' lives in mission. Through them, the Sisters discover attitudes to be developed and lived (5.6.2.1-5.6.2.4). The Sisters link Scripture or other spiritual sources to their personal spiritual journey and to their lives in mission (5.6.2.1). For instance, Scripture helped PL (7) to change her idea of and praxis in mission. Scripture is helping PB (8) to be more flexible in her service. Scripture is also helping PG (12, 5.6.2.1) to be awake and attentive to the needs of others. PA (9-10, 5.6.2.4) is finding great inspiration in a Protestant theologian and, for their service in mission, most of the Sisters found similar inspiration in the writings of Pope Francis.

It thus seems clear that Scripture, Church documents and other spiritual authors are part of their life and shape their being in mission. However, the question about how spirituality, Scripture and Tradition shape their way of being in mission, proved to be difficult for them to answer (5.7.1).

Moreover, although Scripture and other spiritual sources prove to be a help for their life in mission, the Sisters do not seem – at least from what transpires from the interviews – to engage with theological reflection in connection with context analysis and discernment. Only one Sister mentions that a Scripture reading (Mt 5:5) helped her

and her collaborators to “plan and pray, and act in a non-violent way” (PK 11, 5.6.2.1) in a situation of war in the country in which they were living.

The causes of the two above difficulties may be traced again in the above mentioned (too) little time for engaging in reflection and apparent lack of context analysis by the Sisters.

I have emphasised earlier that theological reflection starts from *below*, from the faith experience in the context (inductive method) and therefore differs from the traditional way of doing it, that “gave priority to the deductive approach, or *dicta probantia* drawn from the scripture” (Mejía 2006:154). The inductive method, which does not exclude the deductive one, “consists of presenting facts (biblical events, liturgical acts, events in the Church’s life as well as events from daily life) so as to discern the meaning these might have in divine Revelation” (GDC 150). In this way, theological reflection can “immerse itself in praxis; it is praxis-based and praxis-oriented” (Banawiratma 2005:100), and at the same time, has to be rooted in Tradition. Theological reflection from *below*, that is linked to context analysis, enhances the awareness that texts from Scripture (and from the Church’s teaching) can be read “from the perspective of those who are victims of injustice” and be used in pondering social issues and injustice (Singgih 2006:176).

It seems important, therefore, that the Sisters should take time to engage in theological reflection that looks at the context and its specific situations in the light of Scripture and Tradition, in order to get new insights. A contextualised theological reflection, done with the Sisters of the community and with the local people and church community, will lead to a sound discernment and to transformation in society when discernment is acted upon.

Although theological reflection starts from *below*, the study of Scripture is important and cannot be set aside. It can enhance inspiration when doing theological reflection. From the interviews, it does not transpire that scriptural education has a predominant role for the Sisters. Only one Sister (PN 15, 5.10.8) emphasises the need for study of Scripture. Moreover, the statistics of the Congregation show that only a minority of Sisters has theological, Biblical, or pastoral professional preparation (5.10.8). At times, the invitation to engage in Biblical studies is made by the general administration. It can be recommended that such formation should be part of the initial formation of the Sisters as well as of the ongoing formation.

### 6.3.4.3 Developing skills for theological reflection

Some guidelines as to how the Sisters can engage with theological reflection are given below in an approach adapted from Holland and Henriot (1983:104-105).

In a prayerful environment and in the light of Scripture or Church documents, the Sisters, and those who do theological reflection with them, can, with the help of some questions, reflect on the personal or communal experience of encounter with others and with the context previously analysed. They can reflect on the following questions or other questions that help to relate the experience of encounter with others and the analysed context with a Biblical text or Church documents.

Possible questions for reflection might be: What is this situation telling me/us in relation to the chosen Scripture? What are the lights that the Scriptural text sheds on the analysed situation? What, in this situation, diminishes or destroys the values proposed by the Scripture? Where is Jesus here? What are “the signs of the Kingdom” present in this situation? What, in this situation, is an opening up to God? What, in this situation, is a turning away from God? What can “salvation” mean in this situation? What is my/our role in this situation? (Holland & Henriot 1983:104-105).

For theological reflection to be fruitful and transformative, it is important to assume the *standpoint of exploration* (Killen & De Beer 1996:16-19), that is the place in-between tradition and experience. Here, one is called to attentiveness to where he/she is and to start a movement of discovery called “movement toward insight” (:17) that draws into community. Entering the experience of theological reflection as an explorer, means not to know what feelings and images will arise, and what thoughts (also the hidden ones) will be discovered (:18). It is thus important to be attentive to them. These are part of the lived experience of encounter with others, with the context, and lead one into conversation with Scripture and the wisdom of Tradition, whilst “allow[ing] questions to assume the primacy” (:18). Holland and Henriot (1983:16) remind us that “social analysis [and consequently theological reflection] is not a neutral approach, a purely “scientific” and “objective” view of reality.” Both in context analysis and theological reflection, one always bears a subjective starting point (Wright 1.5), which necessarily includes one’s feelings as part of one’s being that can be shared in the group.

Genuine encounter, sound context analysis and theological reflection lead seamlessly to discernment for new ways of being in mission.

### **6.3.5 Discernment**

In Chapter One (1.10.3), I have come to understand that discernment is as a process (Healey) in which one embarks on critical reflection on the human and religious experience. It is a spiritual endeavour that finds its context in prayer (Waaijman), requires conversion (Arrupe) and aims at finding practical application in everyday life. The result of discernment does not mean absolute certitude. Its validity cannot be proved scientifically. Therefore, one remains only with a “subjective certitude” (Astorga) that needs to be rooted in the action of the Spirit. Discernment can be done at a personal or community level, according to the method of St. Ignatius (Lonsdale).

It is in discernment that the other dimensions of the spiral culminate so as to lead into new ways of being in mission.

#### **6.3.5.1 The role of spirituality in discernment**

As indicated earlier, discernment is a spiritual process in the mission spirituality spiral that is related to, and flows from, the other dimensions. Discernment for new ways of being in mission, following the Ignatian way (Lonsdale 1.10.3), is not simply decision making. It is certainly informed by encounters with others, by the analysis of the context in which these live and by the theological reflection done on the situation in that context. But, above all, it is done in a context of prayer, and is led by the Holy Spirit. Spirituality, therefore, plays a central role in discernment.

#### **6.3.5.2 Discernment as a mobilising dimension**

The study of Comboni’s life and mission spirituality (Chapter Three) has shown that discernment was essential for him and became his way of life. In all his endeavours, he used to discern the will of God. Nothing was left to chance (3.5.5). He also wanted his missionaries (men and women) to be able to discern in all circumstances of their life in mission (4.3.2.4).

The Comboni Missionary Sisters understand and place great importance upon the significance of discernment in mission. In Chapter Four (4.5.5), we have seen, that since the 1970s their official documents continuously request the Sisters to make use of the process of discernment and to make it “a way of life” (CA 2004:56). For them, discernment is relevant not only at the personal level but also at community level, that is, when the Sisters have to decide about their commitments in mission.

The fact that the Sisters interviewed identify new ways of being in mission (5.10), and that in the interviews two Sisters (PN 5; PL 8) speak about how discernment is part of their life (5.5.1), seems to confirm that discernment is done by some Sisters. On the other hand, most of the Sisters interviewed admit directly (PF 7) or indirectly (PN 4; PH 2; PL 13; etc.) that discernment is, to a certain extent, lacking in the Congregation or that it is, at least, perceived as a challenge (5.5.1). All the “how to” questions ultimately amount to discernment and indicate the need for the Sisters to practice it.

This alleged *lack* of discernment in the Congregation can be linked to the *lack* of reflection on mission and spirituality that to a certain extent seems to be present in the Congregation (5.9). The cause of this *lack* of reflection might be traced to the many commitments of the Sisters in mission, which consequently results in a lack of time for reflection (PD 11; PC 9-10). If, on the one hand, the Sisters recognise a certain lack of reflection, on the other hand, they express the need, and the desire, to engage with reflection on mission and on spirituality (5.9). The acknowledgment of praxis as a combination of reflection and action (1.11.5) can help the Sisters to avoid the *temptation* of thinking that *doing* is far more important than *reflecting* in mission. In turn, *collective, transformative and holistic* praxis (Kritzinger 1.11.5) can be enhanced.

The Sisters’ *scatteredness*, of which PD (11, 5.9) speaks: being always on the move and not having time to stop and reflect (PG 15; PC 9-10, 5.9); the difficulty of working in collaboration with the local church, that can lead to “creating our own programmes ...” (PA 16, 5.10.1); the decreasing number of Sisters that prevented them from daring something new (PF 7, 5.5.1); might be cited as possible causes for the lack of reflection and discernment.

Another cause, not mentioned by the Sisters, but that may be read between the lines, may be found in their limited use of the two previous dimensions in the spiral by the Sisters: context analysis and contextual theological reflection. It has become clear, by now, that the other dimensions of the spiral are essential if one wants to practice a sound discernment in mission that is not merely decision making.

The fact that God is at work in the world, is a call to “read” the signs in our society and context, as *Gaudium et Spes* reminds us (GS 4). Discernment is a call to recognise what is true and has to be done in the midst of problems, noise etc. Myers wisely emphasises that Jesus often spoke of “eyes that see and ears that hear” (2011:231), and that is what is needed to discern transformative ways of being in mission.

Therefore, discernment, done in connection with context analysis and with a social purpose, “becomes a way of sharing in God’s action in history” (Henriot 2006:38). Discernment is not merely discursive reasoning, which is an intellectual exercise. It involves feelings and values and is therefore *affective*. It is also *effective* because it leads to planning, implementing and evaluating (Dulles in Henriot 2006:38).

A sound discernment enhances a more significant participation in the *missio Dei*, that for me cannot be renounced (2.2.1.9), together with the pilgrim Church that is missionary by nature (AG 2). Through a sound discernment, the various “mission *as*,” explored in Chapter Two (2.2.1), can be lived according to the needs of the given context, thus bringing about transformation in society.

The suggested way forward for the Sisters, at this point, can only be that they seriously engage with the process of discernment, not only when big decisions need to be taken, but also as a way of life, and not only at a personal level, but also at communal level (Lonsdale 1.1.1.3). The Sisters can be assisted by the spirituality of the Cross that was central for Comboni (3.4.4). In the face of the difficult situations in which they have to discern their way of being in mission, the Sisters need to contemplate the Cross, at the foot of which good works are born, grow and bring about fruit. The Sisters are called to listen to God and “to the cry of a wounded and excluded humanity, in order to continue offering a charismatic response” (CA 2010:7) that generates and nurtures life. In order to discern new ways of being in mission, the Sisters – as women of the Gospel and of encounter – are also called to live “the mysticism of daring” (CA 2004:72-73), in which mission and spirituality can find integration (4.4.4.5). Moreover, Comboni wanted his missionaries to be “holy and capable.” By striving to live these attitudes, the Sisters can experience that unity of life in which faith, spirituality and action in mission are linked and find integration (4.3.2.2) and enhance a sound discernment.

### **6.3.5.3 Discerning with others**

I have decided to dedicate a separate sub-section bearing the title “Discerning with others” because it is an important point that can really assist the Sisters’ way of discerning.

In Chapter Four (4.5.5) I indicated that the Rule of Life implies the inclusion of the members of the local church in the discernment to “find adequate and courageous answers ...” (RoL 15.1). Their inclusion is not found in other official documents. But, in the interviews, two Sisters strongly emphasise its importance when the Sisters have to discern about the kind of presence that they want to be (PJ 13; PD 12, 5.10.5).

Just as context analysis and theological reflection need to be done with local people and the local church, it also has to happen with discernment. It is they, in fact, who are the primary and immediate agents in mission (Luzbetak 5.3.3).

### **6.3.6 Reflexivity**

I come to reflexivity, the last dimension of the mission spirituality spiral. In Chapter Two (2.4.2.6), I have introduced it as that self-critical reflection (Swinton & Mowat) that one has to continuously engage with along the spiral. In fact, one has to be aware of how one’s faith, values and experiences influence and shape the journey throughout the dimensions. Self-evaluation and transformation are also part of reflexivity.

#### **6.3.6.1 The role of spirituality in reflexivity**

Earlier in this chapter (6.3.2.7), I have recalled how spirituality informs mission encounter. In fact, it is encounter and relationship with the Triune God that transforms the person from inside (Egan, McGinn 1.10.6; Kirk 1.9.1) and opens for him/her the possibility for genuine encounters, that in turn, bring about more personal and social transformation (Nolan 2.3.9, Sheldrake 1.9.2). The World Council of Churches (1.9.1) reminds us that genuine “mission spirituality is always transformative” (TTL 30).

When embarking on self-critical reflection throughout the spiral, this reflection does not, or should not happen in a vacuum, but has to happen in the presence of God.

One has to reflect, in a continuous discernment in the Spirit, on how personal transformation through encounter with others, the context, the Word of God and Tradition has occurred.

### **6.3.6.2 Reflexivity as a mobilising dimension**

Critical reflection and evaluation on how the spiral has been followed was certainly not done either by Comboni or by the Comboni Missionary Sisters, because they do not know the spiral as I conceptualised it. However, in Chapter Three, we have seen how Comboni continuously reflected both on the experience of his predecessors in the mission in Central Africa and on his own experience. He used to analyse, evaluate, revise and change his ideas, where necessary (3.3.2.2; 3.5.6; 4.2.1).

As for the Comboni Missionary Sisters, we have seen (4.5.6) that official documents also recall the importance of evaluation of the activities and kind of presences in mission. However, analysis of the interviews has shown that self-evaluation represents a sort of challenge (PN 4, 5.5.4), and that evaluation seems to be lacking, to a certain extent, in the Congregation (PM 14; PO 9, 5.10.6). Evaluation is therefore proposed by the Sisters who have been interviewed as a relevant way of being in mission (5.10.6) that they need to assume and perform in the midst of their activities.

It is difficult to trace the causes for this alleged lack of evaluation. However, reading between the lines of the interviews, one may be induced to suppose that the cause can be traced back again to the great importance attached to *doing* that supersedes *being* and therefore to a dearth of qualitative time devoted to reflection.

Reflexivity is one of the dimensions of Kritzinger's praxis matrix (2008:771-773; 2011:49-52; 2013:37-38; Kritzinger & Saayman 2011:4-6). To him I owe the insights on this dimension that has become part of the mission spirituality spiral. Reflection on and evaluation of one's own proceeding and reflection on one's personal learning and transformation are part of a sound mission praxis. They can enhance a sound discernment. Kritzinger emphasises the importance of reflection "on the wholeness and integrity of our [mission] praxis" (2008:786), and wisely proposes *journaling* among other tools for this dimension. I personally utilise it and find it very helpful. It allows me to recall feelings, thoughts, and insights and to revisit the path travelled. Thus, it enhances reflection on and evaluation of my *being* and *doing* in mission. *Journaling* is



of great help in developing attentiveness to God's continuous *work* in the world, in my life and in everyday life events (1.5). It facilitates deeper understanding of the meaning of these events for my life; the building of new knowledge and finally discernment and subsequent actions.

We have seen in Chapter Four (4.5.6) that in 2009 (Brambilla 7.12.2009 Prot. 494/09) and 2010 (CA 2010:23) an important breakthrough for the Comboni Missionary Sisters happened with the assertion that the Sisters and their activities have to be evaluated by the local people and the local church. One Sister (PJ 11, 5.10.6) emphasises that this does not seem to happen in the Congregation and she advocates it as a relevant way of being in mission that the Sisters should take up. If, on the one hand, it becomes essential that others are allowed to evaluate the Sisters' work and their kind of presence, on the other hand, this can and should be taken a step forward. Local people must be given "the responsibility for evaluating" (Myers 2011:298) the work done by the Sisters, as well as, their kind of presences. By giving local people the responsibility for evaluating empowerment becomes reality.

When engaging in mission, one hopes to contribute to the transformation of others' lives and contexts. But "[i]f there is integrity in a transformative relationship, all parties must experience transformation" (Myers 2011:298). Thus, self-transformation is also part of reflexivity. The Sisters interviewed may not be aware of it but during the interviews, they reported that encounters with people and the context brought about some transformations in their perception of God (5.4.1), that also transformed their approach to prayer and liturgy (5.4.2). A new perception of reality has also occurred in the Sisters, which, in turn, allows them to approach and accept reality in its complexity without falling into pessimism or fatalism (PA 7, 5.4.3), but which, rather, develops trust in God. Transformation in lifestyle becomes then simply a consequence (5.4.4). All these transformations are not only the result of genuine mission encounters with others and the context. Transformation starts by encounter and relationship with the Triune God.

It seems clear therefore that the Comboni Missionary Sisters should make good use of reflexivity. Critical reflection on their activities, self-evaluation and evaluation by others can enhance a more transformative way of their being in mission.

### **6.3.7 The mission spirituality spiral as a mobilising tool:**

#### **Concluding comments**

In the above presentation of the mission spirituality spiral as a mobilising tool, I showed how it integrates theology and praxis, reflection, experience and action, mission and spirituality. A few practical suggestions for the Comboni Missionary Sisters have also been made.

I explored the significance of each dimension and I have elucidated the role spirituality plays in all the other dimensions. In this tool, that is more a process starting from *below* (from the experience and the context) than a methodology or a technique, we have seen how encounter with the Triune God (spirituality) informs and shapes the other dimensions. At the same time, action in mission informs and shapes the encounter with God.

Being constantly present throughout the spiral, spirituality ensures that the discerned ways of being in mission, or actions to be taken, bring about development or social transformation that may generate life in abundance (Jn 10:10), at all levels, in a holistic way. This makes the difference between a Christian mission, rooted in the encounter with the Triune God, and projects of NGOs or other agencies (*Aparecida Document* 5.10.10).

It has also become clear how the dimensions are linked and seamlessly flow into one another. Through the mission spirituality spiral the various *mission as* dimensions can find their concretisation according to the given context. To live mission *as* prophecy means that in announcing the Good News in deeds and words, denunciation of structures of sin is included (Bevans, Amaladoss 2.2.1.1), as also PC (5, 11, 5.6.1; 5.10) affirms in her interview.

Participation in the dialogical life and mission of the Triune God leads to mission *as* prophetic dialogue (Bevan & Schroeder 2.2.1.2) in humility and vulnerability. Most of the Sisters emphasise this in the interviews. Mission *as* testifying to one's encounter with God (Karavaltcheva 2.2.1.4) and mission *as* invitation (Keum 2.2.1.5) also require humility. Where life is plagued by suffering and violence, mission *as* reconciliation and forgiveness brings about healing and restoration of one's dignity (Schreiter 2.2.1.3).

The dimensions of the spiral lead to mission *as* holistic liberation and option *for* the poor. This, in turn, has to lead to a doing *with* the poor and finally to a doing *by* the poor themselves (Bedford-Strohm 2.2.1.6).

Mission *as* care for the earth, that finds its theological foundation in Scripture, emphasises an ecological concern linked to social justice (Pope Francis, Boff 2.2.1.7). It is a general concern that intensifies, especially in poor areas.

In areas characterised by religious pluralism, mission *inter gentes* emphasises a more dialogical and mutual mission (Tan, Phan 2.2.1.8).

The mission spirituality spiral proves to be a good tool for discerning ways of being in mission that bring about transformation in those who embark on it, in the context and in the people living in that context. Building on incarnational principles of the various encounters and in continuous reflection on those encounters, brings about transformative mission. The spiral provides means to discern concrete actions to be undertaken in specific contexts.

Finally, the mission spirituality spiral, by involving all the human, social and spiritual dimensions of a person, provides a way to that wholeness (Delio 2.3.8) to which humanity is called, for both those who embark on it and those who benefit from it.

The study of the mission spirituality of the Comboni Missionary Sisters by means of the mission spirituality spiral used as an analytical tool has highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the Sisters, thus enhancing new possible actions to be taken. This suggests that the spiral can also be used to study mission spirituality of other religious congregations.

## **6.4 The way forward for the Comboni Missionary Sisters**

In order to consider a way forward for the Comboni Missionary Sisters I have to recall the first issue mentioned: a certain dichotomy between spirituality and mission.

Experiencing this dichotomy in missionary life is certainly nothing new for the Sisters. Study of their official documents shows that the need for integration of spirituality and action in mission has often been emphasised by the General Superiors in their circular letters (4.5.1.1) or by the Acts of the Chapters (4.5.1.2). This dichotomy is also clearly expressed in the synthesis of the ideas gathered during the *ministeriality*

workshop held by the Sisters in 2012 (4.4.5). Analysis of the interviews also has shown throughout Chapter Five that the Sisters experience this dichotomy, although they advocate an inseparability of mission and spirituality (5.7.3).

The concerns raised are that: 1) *doing* mission, at times, becomes the most important thing (PG 15, 5.9) that defines who one is (PA 17, 5.8.2); 2) that the social and material dimensions of mission are dominant in the service of the Sisters and, therefore, their spiritual dimension does not emerge; and 3) that some Sisters call for a return to evangelisation (5.10.8), to charism and spirituality (5.10.9). These concerns indicate that spirituality and mission still need to be integrated.

A way for the Sisters to overcome this dichotomy can now be proposed: the use of the mission spirituality spiral. We have seen how the spiral integrates reflection and action, theology and practice, mission and spirituality. From the official documents of the Sisters and from the interviews, it has become apparent that the Sisters already live the dimensions of the spiral but they do it sporadically and without the awareness of the great potential of the dimensions in the process of the spiral. Through the connectedness and the flowing of the dimensions of the spiral into one another, the Sisters can overcome that *scatteredness* that they lament in their being in mission (CA 2016:5.1; PD 11, 5.9). Simultaneously, through the spiral, they can also overcome the alleged *lack* of reflection on spirituality and mission because the spiral process requires reflection on *being* and *doing* in mission.

In the interviews, two Sisters (PF 1; PK 16, 5.10.4) pointed out that the choice of living on the peripheries of big cities is a relevant way of being in mission. However, the Sisters do not seem to reflect in depth about it. They do not identify the challenge and the richness of multiculturalism present on the peripheries, and therefore how to engage with interculturality. PN (1, 5.5.2) describes the context in which she and her community live as a “multi-ethnic” one. Once again, the importance of being informed about the changes that cultures undergo due to globalisation (Schreiter 5.10.4) has to be emphasised. Moreover, the use of the mission spirituality spiral can be useful for the Sisters living on the peripheries of big cities in order to find transformative ways of being in mission in the midst of multicultural settings.

By following the spiral in its dimensions, transformation can be experienced by the Sisters in their own lives and in their ways of being in mission, as well as by the local people and the local church. Sound and genuine encounters with God, with others, with the contexts through its analysis and with the Word of God and Tradition, can lead

the Sisters to discernment for concrete, relevant and transformative actions in a specific context in mission.

The other issues mentioned above (6.2) can be resolved and overcome in the implementation of the spiral, as indicated above in the various dimensions.

In some places in this thesis I have emphasised the importance of becoming familiar with and making use of academic disciplines, like anthropology, cultural and social studies, and missiology and spirituality. With the help of these disciplines, the Sisters can be more empowered with knowledge and skills to reflect at a deeper level on transformative ways of being in mission and consequently integrate them with experience by putting them into practice in a more effective way.

A few other suggestions can be made to the Sisters. Analysis of the interviews showed that culture shock (5.3.2) and reverse culture shock (5.5.5) can be dealt with more successfully by the Sisters. The use of the spiral can be of particular assistance when starting a service in a new country or place. It can also be of concrete help to the Sisters, who return to their country of origin, when encountering the people and the context, in a way that can lead to discern new ways of being in mission in their “own” country.

The spiral is a tool that has to be continuously used, not only when arriving in a mission context for the first time. In fact, situations and realities continuously change. As the Sisters advocate that discernment “must become a way of life” (CA 2004:56), the spiral can assist in discernment also on a smaller scale in everyday life in an even deeper way. For both great and small discernments, by starting it anew, the spiral acquires depth. In the words of Holland and Henriot (2.4.1.2), the spiral “does not simply retrace old steps but breaks new grounds.”

The starting point for the Sisters serving in a given context can be the critical reflection on and self-evaluation of, their way of being in mission. Moreover, by giving local people the responsibility to evaluate them, new and more relevant ways of being in mission can be enhanced.

In this research I have studied the mission spirituality of the Comboni Missionary Sisters in their official documents and in the interviews through the lens of the mission spirituality spiral. I have not given consideration to the mission spirituality lived by the Sisters who suffered under the Mahdist revolution or by other Sisters in the Congregation from the past and from the present time. These may be future areas of research within the Congregation.

As indicated at the beginning of this chapter (6.1), being a member of the Congregation of the Comboni Missionary Sisters, I was both a researcher (*outsider*) and an *insider*. Thus, it is clear that all that has been said about and for the Sisters also concerns me. This means that, by reading again this research, I can truthfully substitute the word “Sisters” with “we” or “us.” This applies especially for all the suggestions made, in order to live a mission spirituality that generates transformative ways of being in mission.

# **Chapter Seven**

## **Discerning a spirituality for transformative mission: Conclusion**

This final chapter offers suggestions of areas for further research.

This research did not leave me as I was before undertaking it. It has clearly had an impact on me. Learning and personal transformation happened in me. These are also part of this chapter, as well as a possible personal way forward.

### **7.1 Identification of areas for further studies**

This thesis has provided the study and implementation of the analytical and mobilising tool of the mission spirituality spiral that brings missiology and spirituality into conversation and relation. The research had a specific focus on the Comboni Missionary Sisters and their founder. Further research needs to continue on how missiology and spirituality relate to each other. In other words, more research needs to be done on how missiology is and can be informed and shaped by spirituality, and how spirituality is and can be informed and shaped by missiology.

The ecumenical use of the mission spirituality spiral also needs to be emphasised. In fact, the encounter with the Triune God, with others, with context and its analysis, with Scripture and, to a certain extent, with Tradition, is something we have in common with other Christian denominations. Therefore, discernment and reflexivity can certainly be done in ecumenical circles. Models for collaboration and ecumenism can be developed through the use and maybe the expansion of the spiral. Further research is required in this area.

In this thesis a thought was given to primal world-views that are fundamentally religious and spiritual (Bediako 2.3.9). Also, in the light of the present thesis, the suggestion that primal imagination can be the means to restore the unity of theology (and therefore of missiology) and spirituality needs to be further researched.

For a missiology that also reflects on mission *as* care of the earth, the African concept of *Botho/Ubuntu* (Lenka Bula 2.3.8) can be of help to overcome an absolutistic anthropocentrism that risks leading the earth to an ecological collapse. This is another area for further missiological research, by using the mission spirituality spiral.

In Chapter Two (2.3.7) I introduced a short discussion on spirituality and Eucharist. In their relation of reciprocity (Gittins), both bring about healing and transformation in the person who is then sent. This insight can be further explored including missiology in the discussion. In other words, missiology can engage in a more in-depth study of the way that the celebration of the Eucharist and the other Sacraments can help to integrate mission and spirituality.

The discussion on spirituality and science (2.3.8) emphasised the need for moving from a spirituality that strives for perfection to one that strives for wholeness. As missiology also discusses ways that may give people life in abundance (Jn 10:10) – and therefore life in wholeness – spirituality, science and missiology need to be brought into conversation through further studies.

Kritzinger proposes a missiology as *encounterology* (1.10.4; 2.2.3) that critically reflects on encounters between Christians and believers of other religions or faiths. With the insights of this thesis another proposal can be made: a missiology as *encounterology* that critically reflects on a series of encounters: with the Triune God (spirituality); with others in their uniqueness; with the context to be analysed; with Scripture and Tradition that shed light on that context and thus with oneself in a process of continuous evaluation and transformation. Such reflection leads to discernment for new ways of being in mission. This insight needs further research.

The metaphor of *embrace* used by Volf (5.2.3) provides powerful insights for genuine mission encounters. Deepening the relationship between encounter, *embrace* and mission can give a stronger impetus to mission, thus making it more transformative. *Embrace* can foster a mission in which respect for others, reciprocity, and empowerment are guaranteed. This can be another area for further research.

## **7.2 Personal learning, transformation and way forward**

Embarking on this thesis, learning and transformation happened in me. Today, I can say I am not the same woman as I was before this thesis. The first learning and



transformation in me, is the fact that through the research, my knowledge of mission and spirituality grew and intermingled with my experience of mission and spirituality.

I find inspiration in the practical importance of *missio Dei*, from the insights on the practical relevance of the Trinity in my life, both from the Orthodox Church (Ware 2.2.2) and from the Catholic Church (LaCugna 2.2.2). “Shared life between God and creature [me]” has become increasingly part of my everyday life. Linked to this, the awareness of *missio Dei* in which all Christians and I are privileged to participate, makes me also feel a greater responsibility because I am entrusted with this participation.

The insight that at the core of mission and spirituality there is an encounter with the Triune God (2.2.3; 2.3.9), has changed my perspective on mission and spirituality. Spirituality and mission aim respectively to live this encounter with the Triune God (5.7.2.2) and to *facilitate* this encounter for others (5.7.2.1) in all the activities that I may undertake in mission. As a consequence, a continuous interface and relationship between mission and spirituality has grown in my personal life.

In the course of this research my knowledge and appreciation of the mission spirituality of Daniel Comboni and hence, of my Congregation, increased in me the desire to live it in full. In fact, I discovered that some of its aspects were, to a certain extent, “asleep.” Thanks to this research, my sense of belonging to the Congregation has been strengthened and therefore, the desire has grown to undertake something concrete that could help us all.

Engaging with the analysis of the interviews, I became conscious that as a Congregation we suffer, to a certain extent, a lack of reflection on mission and spirituality. Hence, I realised how important this research was, first of all for me, and also for the Sisters.

A new understanding of communal mission and spirituality has taken deeper root in me. I now appreciate and want to continue to live and *be* in mission as a member of this community of Sisters and with others (local people and local church). Sharing with others my experience and my relationship with God, welcoming the spiritual sharing of others, and sharing faith together in the Eucharistic celebration, have become very important to me. I consider these as relevant ways of being in mission.

I learned a lot from the shared experiences and insights of the Sisters interviewed. I have already pointed out that during the interviews and during the analysis, I felt being “on holy ground.” I often felt that I was called into question by their sharing, by their

ways of living encounter and relationship with God and by their passion for mission. I consider it a real privilege that the Sisters allowed me to “enter” into their life and their experiences. Their honesty and openness to participating in this research, even in exposing their weaknesses and therefore vulnerability, have been a great gift for me. I was allowed to “enter” the mystery that each person is. This required humility from my side.

During the research, I felt a growing need to approach anthropology in a deeper way. I realised that insights from anthropology can help me approach others and reality in a better way, which can lead to a more transformative mission.

The elaboration of the mission spirituality spiral was of great importance for me. I realised that the contributions of other missiologists and scholars, upon whom I drew, were helping me to elaborate something *old* and *new* at the same time. But, it was while using the spiral in the thesis, that I realised its actual importance and that of each dimension. It has become clear that I am the first one to have benefited and will benefit from the mission spirituality spiral. I benefited from it during the research because it gave me the possibility of studying the mission spirituality of Comboni and of the Congregation in a more comprehensive and holistic way. The use of the spiral will benefit me and my community here in the township of Mamelodi. In fact, due to various circumstances, we need to discern about the kind of presence we can and want to be. The use of the spiral will help us to discern in a way that we can both remain faithful to the charism of Comboni and find relevant and transformative ways of being in mission.

Looking back at the whole research, I realised that if I had proceeded differently at certain stages, the research might have gained in depth. For example, conducting the interviews at a later stage of the research would have helped to refine the questions and make them more relevant. If I had asked questions on how and to what extent the Sisters engage in discernment and context analysis, I would have ascertained their involvement in greater depth. Other criteria of selection of the Sisters to interview might have also led to different results.

At the end of this research on mission spirituality, with a special focus on the Congregation of the Comboni Missionary Sisters, I can say that it is I who, to a certain extent, have become the object of my enquiry (cf. Flanagan 2007:1).

### 7.3 Conclusion

In this thesis I have proposed that spirituality is the *motor* of mission and that missiology and spirituality need to interface and enter into an ongoing relationship for mutual enrichment. My contention that spirituality and mission have at their core the experience of an encounter and relationship with the Triune God has been explored in depth and led to the insight that mission and spirituality are inseparable. Thus, it is appropriate to speak of mission spirituality.

I have, therefore, proposed the study of mission spirituality by means of the mission spirituality spiral that I elaborated by drawing upon contributions of other scholars. We have seen that the spiral can be used as an analytical tool to study the mission spirituality of Comboni and of the Comboni Missionary Sisters, as well as a mobilising tool to discern transformative ways of being in mission.

The expectations of the Sisters interviewed were to get, through this research, guidelines to find transformative ways of being in mission that can guide their *ministeriality*, rooted in spirituality. By proposing the tool of the mission spirituality spiral, these guidelines have been made available to them, and simultaneously to all those who, like me, believe that mission and spirituality are in close relationship, inform and shape one another, cannot be separated, and, therefore, need to be studied in their relationship.

The mission spirituality spiral, that starts from *below*, from the reality, leads to discernment of concrete *ways* of being in a given context in mission. These *ways* become concrete actions, especially among the poor and marginalised. These *ways* are transformative, both for those who embark on the spiral and for the local people and local church. By means of the mission spirituality spiral *regeneration* and *life in abundance* can be engendered in a continuous evolution towards *wholeness*.

In conclusion, maintaining that mission, missiology and spirituality are inseparable, and need to be continuously in dialogue, I can also say with conviction that:

*Mission without spirituality is mere activism;  
Spirituality without mission is mere escapism.*



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# **Appendix 1**

## **Transcribed Interviews**

Unpublished material

PA	Interview no. 1
PB	Interview no. 2
PC	Interview no. 3
PD	Interview no. 4
PE	Interview no. 5
PF	Interview no. 6
PG	Interview no. 7
PH	Interview no. 8
PI	Interview no. 9
PJ	Interview no. 10
PK	Interview no. 11
PL	Interview no. 12
PM	Interview no. 13
PN	Interview no. 14
PO	Interview no. 15



## Appendix 2

### Informed Consent Form

**Research Title:** *Discerning a spirituality for transformative mission: In Dialogue with the Comboni Missionary Sisters.*

**Researcher:** Sr. Laura Lepori

The researcher, a member of the Comboni Missionary Sisters, is currently living in the township of Mamelodi (Pretoria), South Africa. She is investigating how the discernment for a relevant mission spirituality for the Comboni Missionary Sisters occurs. She believes that, at an academic level, the research will allow missiologists to gain an insight into the mission-spirituality interface and understand better the centrality of spirituality to missiology and mission praxis. She also believes that the research will help the Comboni Missionary Sisters to discern how to be a relevant presence by finding new transformative strategies for their *ministeriality* in the context(s) where they live.

I understand I am involved in the research through an interview that will be conducted by the researcher. I understand the researcher will select approximately 15 Comboni Missionary Sisters living and operating in different continents (Europe, Latin America, Africa, and in Middle East).

I understand that the knowledge gained from this research may help me and other Comboni Missionary Sisters to deepen our mission spirituality and to find new ways of being a relevant presence in the contexts where we live.

I understand that the interview might cause some discomfort, anxiety and/or fatigue. I realise that the research will take approximately an hour of my time and involve audio taping my voice. I agree that the researcher may quote my views in her thesis and in any subsequent publications that may flow from it.

I know that my participation is strictly voluntary. I know that I have the right to withdraw at any time should I wish to do so.

I agree to participate in this research, and I have received a copy of this consent form. I have been assured that my identity will not be revealed (if I do not wish) while the research is being conducted or when the research is published. I understand the researcher will request a feedback from me after the processing.

If I have questions about the research or about being the participant, I know I can call the researcher. I may reach her via email: [lauralepori@ymail.com](mailto:lauralepori@ymail.com) or on the phone: 0027 012 840 1392 (Home) or 079 577 7286 (Cell). I can also contact her supervisor Dr. Magdalene Karecki at her email address: [madgek@gmail.com](mailto:madgek@gmail.com).

Participant's signature\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

Sr. Laura Lepori  
RESEARCHER

Date\_\_\_\_\_